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What Is Pre-Reflective Self-Consciousness an Awareness Of? An Argument for the Egological View

1. Introduction

On a view that begins with Descartes and is then continued by classical phenomenologists (e.g., Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre), there is a constitutive connection between consciousness and self-consciousness. The opposite view has, though, presided in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind. Accordingly, a subject can be in a conscious state without necessarily being self-conscious.

The decline of the traditional view can arguably be attributed to the fact that the “something it is like” of conscious mental states—their *phenomenal character*—has come to be equated with the so-called qualitative character of experience. The latter is usually spelled out in terms of the characteristic qualitative properties (or *qualia*) that conscious mental states possess but that unconscious states do not. Consequently, most research in the philosophy of consciousness has focused on explaining these qualitative properties of mental states, properties that are taken to be *prima facie* intrinsic to mental states.

Recently, some have argued that the phenomenal character of conscious mental states, in addition to their qualitative character, is also necessarily characterized by a *subjective character* or *for-me-ness*. This pinpoints to the fact that conscious mental states are first-personally given to their subject and not just states of the subject (see, among others, Janzen 2008; Kriegel 2009;

Levine 2001; Zahavi 2005). Moreover, this is taken to be what distinguishes conscious mental states from non-conscious ones.

This view, which is sometimes called *Subjectivism about phenomenal character* (Kriegel 2009), has catalyzed something of a revival of the traditional view. For it is mostly claimed that what constitutes for-me-ness at the phenomenological level is a characteristic non-inferential awareness the subject has of (some aspects of) their own mental life. This suggests that some sort of self-consciousness (or self-awareness)¹ is constitutively involved in consciousness. According to Subjectivism, thus, when I have a visual experience of a mountain landscape, there are two kinds of awareness involved: (1) one that is directed outwards, toward the mountain landscape and (2) another that is directed inwards, toward something that concerns the experience itself. (2) is phenomenologically more elusive and subtle than (1), yet it is still experiential (or phenomenal) in the sense that it substantially contributes to the overall phenomenology of the subject (or so advocates for this view maintain). The literature typically refers to (2) as “pre-reflective self-consciousness” to distinguishes it from the more sophisticated phenomenon of reflecting on one’s internal goings-on.²³

¹ I shall take self-consciousness and self-awareness to be synonymous.

² More on the distinction between pre-reflective and reflective self-consciousness in the subsequent section.

³ Another common label for (2) is ‘inner awareness’ (see, among others, Farrell and McClelland 2017; Kriegel 2019; McClelland 2015). Besides some difference of connotation, ‘pre-reflective self-consciousness’ and ‘inner awareness’ are essentially interchangeable, as they refer to precisely the same phenomenon. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, I shall employ mainly the expression “pre-reflective self-consciousness”.

There has recently been a lively debate around the nature of pre-reflective self-consciousness.⁴ A controversial issue in this debate concerns what is phenomenally involved, or given, in pre-reflective self-consciousness. This is the issue of what we might call the object of such an awareness: what is pre-reflective self-consciousness an awareness *of*? Surely, its content regards the concurrent inner life of the subject, but how richly should one construe this inner content?⁵ The main alternative in the literature is between *non-egological* and *egological* views. The non-egological view (NE) holds that pre-reflective self-consciousness only involves an awareness of the subject's occurrent experience. Thus, its content is *anonymous*; it is fully constituted by the subject's occurrent mental state and best expressed by sentences such as "this mental state is occurring" or "there is a mental state". When I have a visual experience of a mountain landscape, NEists would thus claim that I am both phenomenally aware of the mountain landscape and phenomenally aware of having a visual experience.⁶

⁴ There are also ongoing debates around the existence of pre-reflective self-consciousness and its pervasiveness in consciousness. I shall, though, proceed as if pre-reflective self-consciousness exists and is ubiquitous in non-reflective experience.

⁵ Terms such as "object" and "content" might suggest that I am treating pre-reflective self-consciousness in relational and representational terms, which is a matter of contention in the topical literature (cf. Frank 2022; Zahavi 2006). This is not my claim, however. "Object" and "content" should be understood in a non-committal and very loose sense, which simply serve to convey the issue at stake. To borrow from Williford, this is a sense in which, "if x is aware of y , then y is an object for, or the content of, x regardless of whether the awareness in question is relational or non-relational" (2006, 3).

⁶ In what follows, I shall take 'experience' to be a synonym of 'conscious mental state' and I shall move freely between the two expressions in discussing NE and E.

The egological view (E), in contrast, maintains that pre-reflective self-consciousness does not only involve an awareness of the subject's occurrent experience. It also involves an awareness of the subject undergoing the experience. Its content, therefore, is partially constituted by the subject of the experience and best expressed by statements such as "I am in this mental state" or "my mental state is occurring". As Dan Zahavi (2005) puts it, Eists would claim that

when I watch a movie by Bergman, I am not only intentionally directed at the movie, nor merely aware of the movie being *watched*, I am also aware that it is being watched by *me*, that is, that *I am watching the movie*.

(Zahavi 2005, 99, italics in the original).

We can think of NE as a *phenomenally mental-state involving* view of pre-reflective self-consciousness and of E as a *phenomenally subject-involving* view of pre-reflective self-consciousness (Sebastián 2012; 2019).

Determining the object of pre-reflective self-consciousness is crucial for a proper account of pre-reflective self-consciousness. Such a determination also has important implications for any theory of consciousness itself. Since it is what for-me-ness amounts to, pre-reflective self-consciousness is used to motivate theoretical claims about consciousness. Different views on pre-reflective self-consciousness arguably drive different theoretical claims. The self-representational theory of consciousness is notable in this regard. It has two variants depending on whether the awareness at issue concerns the experience or (also) the subject. In the former, the mental state represents *itself* (c.f. Kriegel 2009); in the latter, the mental state represents *the self* (cf. Sebastián 2012).

In this paper I intend to address this controversial issue by arguing in favor of E. For this purpose, the rest of the paper is structured as follows. After some additional clarifications on NE and E (section 2), in Section 3, I critically examine how E has been motivated in recent literature. Though I argue that extant motivations do not have the dialectical purchase required to dismiss NE, I maintain that an argument provided by David Rosenthal (1997) is promising in this regard. Such an argument relies on the claim that an awareness of a token mental state entails an awareness of its bearer. The problem is that Rosenthal does not offer any motivation for such a claim. Thus, in Section 4, I aim to provide such a motivation by developing a qualified ‘Rosenthalian’ argument for E. Drawing on Michael Thau’s (2002, 2007) distinction between instantial and internal states, I argue that token mental states are structured ‘fact-like’ entities whose subjects are among their constituents. Thus, one cannot be aware of one’s own mental state without thereby being aware of oneself. In section 5, I address a possible objection to my argument.

2. Sharpening NE and E

The controversy between NE and E concerns what pre-reflective self-consciousness is an awareness of; it concerns the “object” of the peculiar self-awareness constituting the for-me-ness of experience. When a subject undergoes an experience, does the for-me-ness of the experience amount to a subject’s pre-reflective awareness of (i) their experience or (ii) also of themselves? NEists answer (i), while Eists answer (ii).

This is a rough characterization of the contrast between NE and E. However, before entering the main argument of the paper, it is expedient to delve into the two views a bit further. Indeed, the claim that an experience includes within it an awareness of itself or (also) its subject

is liable to be misunderstood in ways that open NE and (especially) E to superficial counterexamples and objections. Particularly important in this regard is elucidating the sort of self-consciousness at issue here: *pre-reflective self-consciousness*.

As previously mentioned, the notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness, originally introduced by classical phenomenologists, is, in the first instance, a negative notion: it pinpoints a way of being self-conscious that differs from reflection. Thus, one gets a grip on pre-reflective self-consciousness by contrasting it with reflective self-consciousness. Although properly defining reflectivity is a matter of contention in the relevant literature, I believe it is fair to say that all actors involved in the debate agree that reflective self-consciousness features at least three characteristics.⁷

First, reflective self-consciousness is introspective awareness, which means that it arises from an inward gaze. Reflecting on one's internal goings-on is a matter of explicitly focusing one's attention towards oneself or one's mental state. Second, reflective self-consciousness is conceptual in nature. When one engages in this form of self-awareness, one often deploys concepts. After all, the prototypical example of reflective self-consciousness is first-person thinking. Third, and lastly, reflective self-consciousness is objectual (or observational). It involves stepping back from one's immediate experience and taking a perspective towards oneself or one's mental state, turning the latter into objects of scrutiny. This is to say that reflective self-consciousness is a species (albeit peculiar) of object-consciousness. One might

⁷ For some detailed discussions on the distinction between pre-reflectivity and reflectivity see, among others, Gallagher and Zahavi (2008, ch.3), Kriegel (2009, ch.5), and especially the articles collected in Miguens, Morando, and Preyer (2016).

define the latter as the kind of consciousness in which we are phenomenally aware of something as standing in opposition to us, that is, as something to which we can point. As Zahavi claims:

For something to be given as an object of experience is for it to differ from the subjective experience that takes it as an object. In other words, an object of experience is something that, per definition, stands in opposition to or over against the subject of experience.

(Zahavi 2005, 64)

Perceptual experiences are paradigmatic instances of object consciousness. When I see a red apple in front of me, the apple (or some of its properties) are phenomenally given to me as an object of experience, something which is different from my experience and towards which I occupy the perspective of a spectator.

Given this backdrop, pre-reflective self-consciousness denotes a form of self-consciousness lacking the three features above. Firstly, it does not involve explicitly attending to one's internal goings-on. Moreover, to the extent that attention requires a minimum amount of volition and effort, it is automatic and effortless. Secondly, it is non-conceptual, meaning it does not involve the deployment of concepts, nor is it dependent on mastering any conceptual abilities to obtain. Thirdly, it is non-objectual: it is not a species of object consciousness. This means that the subject is not phenomenally aware of themselves and/or their experience as something that stands in opposition to them and which they can point to. Thus, what we are aware of in pre-reflective self-consciousness is not phenomenally given to us as an object of experience, that is, as an object among other objects, just like the object of a perceptual experience is given to us.

A cautionary note is pertinent at this juncture. As introduced here, non-objectual self-consciousness is characterized primarily in phenomenological terms. That is, it describes how the object of the relevant awareness is phenomenally given to us, viz, as something to which I do not stand in opposition and is not available for demonstrative reference. Sometimes, however, especially in the phenomenological tradition, the non-objectual nature of pre-reflective self-consciousness is taken to imply a non-relational and non-representational stance (cf. Frank 2022; Zahavi 2004, 2005). On this understanding, to claim that the self-awareness constituting for-me-ness is non-objectual is to claim that it lacks an object at which it is directed and is void of any intentional content.

There is something to be said for this view. However, it is pretty controversial. *Prima facie*, there is daylight between the claim that what pre-reflective self-consciousness is an awareness of is not phenomenally given to us as an object and the claim that it is not an object of awareness at all. As pointed out by Gottlieb (2022), when one properly distinguishes between a *phenomenological* and an *intentional* sense of ‘object of experience,’ one cannot simply infer the non-representational and non-relational nature of pre-reflective self-consciousness from the fact that what it makes us aware of is not phenomenally given as an object (p.7).

The literature features some reasons for this inference. Among the latter, particularly compelling to me is that accounting for the self-awareness at stake in the for-me-ness of experience in representational terms violates the so-called *de se* constraint, “which requires that we call “self-conscious” only states in which the representing is directed at the represented as at itself.” (Borner, Frank, and Williford 2019, 11). However, a proper evaluation of this problem for representational accounts of pre-reflective self-consciousness falls outside the scope of the

present paper.⁸ Consequently, in what follows, I will stick with the less committal construal of the non-objectual nature of pre-reflective self-consciousness, remaining neutral on whether pre-reflective self-consciousness is a representational or non-representational form of self-awareness.

Having clarified that, from the insights above we can define NE as the view according to which a subject, in undergoing an experience, is phenomenally aware of their experience in a non-introspective, non-conceptual, and non-objectual way, while we define E as the view according to which a subject, in undergoing an experience, is also phenomenally aware of themselves in a non-introspective, non-conceptual, and non-objectual way.

There are, though, finer-grained versions of NE and E depending on how the mental state and the subject are taken to ‘show up’ in experience. For instance, some Eists take the subject to figure in experience *qua* the subject of that experience (e.g., Janzen 2008; Nida-Rümelin 2017), while others take the subject to figure in experience *qua* the owner of that experience (e.g., Zahavi 2014). To accommodate these subtleties, we can formulate NE and E more precisely as follows:

- (NE) For any subject S and any conscious mental state M, if S is pre-reflectively self-conscious, then S is somehow non-introspectively, non-conceptually, and non-objectually phenomenally aware of M.
- (E) For any subject S and any conscious mental state M, if S is pre-reflectively self-conscious, then S is somehow non-introspectively, non-conceptually, and non-objectually phenomenally aware of S and M.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the troubles of representational accounts of pre-reflective self-consciousness to meet the *de se* constraint see Frank (2007, 2016).

With this more nuanced understanding of the terms of the controversy between NE and E, we can now move on to consider the arguments standardly provided in favor of E.

3. Standard Motivations for E and their Limitations

One sees more arguments for E than for NE in the topical literature. This ‘argumentative imbalance’ is probably because E expresses a bolder view of pre-reflective self-consciousness. Dialectically, Eists find themselves in the disadvantaged position of having the burden of proof on them. None of the arguments for E is, though, generally considered to be sufficiently persuasive to break the stalemate between E and NE in favor of E. Nonetheless, an analysis of this debate can be fruitful in, at least, two respects: (1) to understand which limitations make arguments for E unpersuasive and (2) to assess whether there are, in fact, promising lines of reasoning supporting E.

Extant motivations for defending E can be divided into two categories: phenomenological and theoretical. In the former, the claim is that E is correct because an adequate description of pre-reflective self-consciousness involves the presence of the subject. In the latter, the claim is that E is correct because explanatory and/or metaphysical considerations speak in favor of it. I now discuss these two motivations in more detail.

3.1 Phenomenological Motivations for E

As mentioned, pre-reflective self-consciousness is supposed to be an experiential (or phenomenal) form of awareness. It is then unsurprising that the primary motivations for E are

grounded in phenomenological observations. According to most Eists, it is simply phenomenologically manifest that being pre-reflectively aware of one's own experience is somehow subject-involving. As such, a correct description of the phenomenon at stake must recognize this feature (Sebastián 2012, 9; Zahavi 2005, 16). This point can be strengthened by noting that, in classical and contemporary philosophical discussions about consciousness, there is widespread advocacy for the idea that our experiences are phenomenally marked by a subtle sense of self (see, e.g., Block 1995, 235; Chalmers 1996, 10; James 1890, 226).

To be clear, such phenomenological observations are not sufficient to justify *E per se*. Some subjects of experience (e.g., human infants and non-human animals) might not undergo subject-involving pre-reflective awareness of their own experiences. Nonetheless, phenomenological observations are commonly used as the basis for an abductive argument in favor of *E*. The latter can be loosely formulated as follows:

1. For normal human adults, pre-reflective self-consciousness is egological (phenomenological observation).
2. The best explanation of 1 is that pre-reflective self-consciousness is essentially egological.
3. Therefore, pre-reflective self-consciousness is essentially egological.

We can call this the *argument from phenomenology in favor of E*.

I sympathize with the *argument from phenomenology in favor of E*. If I make a phenomenological observation, my awareness of my concurrent experience involves myself as part of its phenomenology. There is, however, a problem with the argument: it rests on a premise—the *phenomenological observation*—that is extremely hard to vindicate. How is the claim that the egological nature of pre-reflective self-consciousness is revealed by an accurate

phenomenological description supported? Put slightly differently, how can the claim that there is no awareness of oneself present in one's concurrent experience be disproven?

An important issue regarding the resolution of the phenomenological disagreement lurks in this question. No doubt, there are facts of the matter about the phenomenology associated with pre-reflective self-consciousness. However, as long as the question ending the previous paragraph remains open, an opponent of E can simply rebut the *argument from phenomenology in favor of E* by rejecting its first premise. To overcome this shortcoming, advocates of E have offered various theoretical considerations in favor of their view. It is worth noting that these considerations might be used both in support of a universal reading of the phenomenological observation and as independent motivation for the view.

3.2 Theoretical Motivations for E

A first theoretical argument for E involves its role in explaining self-consciousness in thought, that is, in explaining the ability to employ a first-person concept—an I-concept—in thinking about oneself. Arguably, this constitutes the paradigmatic form of self-consciousness.

Such a way of referring to oneself in thinking (standardly called first-person self-reference) has some peculiarities that distinguish it from other modes of thinking about oneself (e.g., by employing names or definite descriptions). A subject referring to themselves with an I-concept is guaranteed to refer to themselves. And, the subject knows that they are referring to themselves. According to some, the only way to make sense of the possibility of first-person thinking is by grounding it in a pre-reflective awareness of oneself (e.g., Grünbaum 2012;

Grünbaum and Zahavi 2013; Howell 2019). We can call this *the argument from first-person thinking in favor of E*.

Prima facie, the *argument from first-person thinking in favor of E* faces the following problem. It seems that something remarkably similar is being advanced to support NE. For example, Kapitan (a long-standing defender of NE) thinks that the ubiquity of pre-reflective self-consciousness grounds the very possibility of indexical thinking (1995, 30–31). This suggests that first-person self-reference is best thought of as a motivation for the existence of pre-reflective self-consciousness rather than as a motivation for E.

One might reply by stressing that first-person self-reference is better explained by E than by NE. However, we require substantial reasons for the explanatory superiority of E over NE for this abductive version of the aforementioned argument to go through. At present, it is unclear whether this is the case. As O’Conaill suggests, NE seems perfectly capable of explaining how the subject becomes able to think about themselves in a first-person manner (2019, 11). Overall, it is doubtful that such explanatory considerations can adequately justify E.

Another—and as far as I know last—theoretical argument for E is to claim that E somehow *follows* from NE. This line of reasoning is doubly implemented in the literature. I shall focus on the one that can be extrapolated from Rosenthal (1997, 791).^{9,10} This stems from the

⁹ Zahavi (2014, 2018) puts forward the other implementation of this argument. It rests on identifying the experiencing subject with their experience (or a part of it). Although philosophically interesting, a detailed discussion of Zahavi’s argument is not possible. For present purposes, it suffices to say that the structural dependence of the argument on the above-mentioned identification strongly limits its appeal.

¹⁰ This is an extrapolation because Rosenthal (1997) never qualifies self-awareness as pre-reflective. In addition, the original argument is framed in the paradigm of Higher Order Theory, presupposing that such a self-awareness is

consideration that one's pre-reflective awareness of one's conscious state is an awareness of it as a *token* mental state rather than as a *type* mental state (first premise).¹¹ On Rosenthal's account, one cannot be pre-reflectively aware of a token mental state (as opposed to a type mental state) without also being aware of the subject whose state it is (second premise). I cannot be aware of the experience of seeing a laptop in front of me without thereby being aware of myself. It follows that pre-reflective self-consciousness is essentially egological (conclusion).

This theoretical defense strikes me as more promising than the argument from first-person thinking in favor of E, if only because it is a *genuine* argument for E. It is, though, flawed by an important limitation. The argument is unsound in this relatively simple form. The argument is unsound in this relatively simple form. Rosenthal neglects to offer reasons unrelated to his specific theory of consciousness to accept what is arguably the crucial premise of his argument: that an awareness of a token mental state implies an awareness of its bearer.¹² Without

non-experiential. Nevertheless, one can draw from the outline of Rosenthal's argument while excluding this additional claim.

¹¹ Roughly put, the distinction between a type and its tokens is an ontological difference between a general sort of thing and its particular instances (see Wetzel 2018). For instance, a mental state type is pain in general, while a token mental state is an individual pain experienced by an individual person.

¹² Rosenthal also does not offer reasons in support of the first premise of his argument (that one's awareness of one's conscious state is an awareness of it as a *token* mental state rather than as a *type* mental state). The truth of this premise is hard to deny, though. As mentioned, one way to express the content of non-egological pre-reflective self-consciousness is in statements such as "this mental state is occurring" or "there is a mental state". On the face of it, these statements refer to particular instances of mental states. It is also not clear how a so basic form of awareness might possess the resources to make its subject aware of the mental state type they are undergoing. It seems to me that an awareness of a universal is more demanding than an awareness of its particular instances.

such reasons, one can easily reject the premise. Kriegel (2009)'s rebuttal of Rosenthal's argument is paradigmatic in this regard. He writes:

I am not sure that, in order to be aware of a token state as a particular, one must be aware of that which makes it the token state it is. Perhaps this is plausible when the awareness is purely intellectual. [...] But it may nonetheless be *implausible* that one cannot quasi-perceive a token state as a particular without quasi-perceiving it as someone's.

(Kriegel 2009, 179).

Given this limitation, it appears that Rosenthal's argument does not adequately support E. It leaves us in the same dialectical situation as those who employ phenomenological arguments. To some, it is perfectly sound; to others, it is not. Still, an improved and qualified argument along Rosenthalian lines may be fit for purpose.

To my knowledge, the only explicit criticism of Rosenthal's first premise comes from O'Conaill (2019), who questions the underlying assumption that our awareness of our own mental state (inner awareness in his terminology) must be an awareness of it *either as a token or as a type*. For O'Conaill, inner awareness does not involve a distinction between universals and particulars. Its content is properly expressed by features-placing statements like “‘*Now it is painful*’ or ‘*Now it looks red*’, as opposed to, e.g., ‘A feeling of pain is now occurring’ or ‘This is an experience of pain’” (sec. 7, my italics). However, these statements do not really involve features of the subject's experiences. Rather, they involve features of their objects, or so I contend. When thought of this way, it is unclear in what sense one's inner awareness is *inner* awareness, that is, an awareness of one's own experience.

4. A Rosenthalian Argument in Favor of E

In this section, I aim to motivate Rosenthal's key (and most contentious) premise, the second one. I do so by formulating a qualified Rosenthalian argument for E, one that can hopefully break the dialectical stalemate between E and NE.

I am labelling the argument 'Rosenthalian' because it employs the main premises of Rosenthal's argument. However, nothing else need correspond to Rosenthal's actual position. I aim to defend the claim that a pre-reflective awareness of a token mental state implies an awareness of its bearer. Whether or not Rosenthal shares this motivation is orthogonal to my purposes here.¹³

How can we begin to assess the claim that a pre-reflective awareness of a token mental state entails an awareness of the subject whose state it is? I think that a profitable way is to clarify what token mental states are supposed to be. Philosophers rarely engage in this task. Neither Rosenthal (1997) nor Kriegel (2009), for example, offer even a thin description of what they take mental states to be. This is not to say that no one has discussed the ontological status of (mental) states. I shall discuss some philosophical works that analyze this issue at some length. It is to say, rather, that philosophers of mind—specifically in the context of explaining consciousness—have simply assumed that they can afford to ignore it. The thought behind this practice seems to be that nothing interesting follows from clarifying the ontological categories according to which the mind is characterized. I believe this to be misleading. As I hope will become clear by the end of this section, the question of whether an awareness of a token mental state implies an awareness of its bearer is sensitive to one's preferred ontology of mental states.

¹³ I suspect that Rosenthal would actually disagree with much of what I am going to say.

Thus, my contention is that Rosenthal's key premise can be supported by a proper clarification of the ontological status of token mental states.¹⁴

I shall proceed as follows. In Section 4.1, I outline two alternative ontological accounts of mental states: (1) the *instantial* mental states view (INSTANTIAL VIEW) and (2) the *internal* mental states view (INTERNAL VIEW). In Section 4.2, I show that INSTANTIAL VIEW straightforwardly supports the crucial premise in Rosenthal's argument for E. I then reformulate Rosenthal's argument accordingly. In Section 4.3, I provide reasons to adopt INSTANTIAL VIEW rather than INTERNAL VIEW.

4.1 The Ontology of Mental States: Two Accounts

In current philosophical discussions, mental phenomena such as beliefs, desires, thoughts, perceptions, emotions, and sensations are typically introduced as a subclass of states of the subject. Preliminarily, we can say that mental states are those states of the subject that possess a mental component. Experiences are also standardly introduced as a subclass of states of the subject. They are those mental states that are phenomenally conscious, that is, they are states that "there is something it is like to be in" (Nagel 1974).

To shed light on what it is for something to be a subject's mental state (be it conscious or unconscious), one must clarify what kinds of entities *states* are. This is not an easy task. As Helen Steward (1997) points out, the category of states is rarely given an explicit treatment in the philosophical literature (despite its extensive use). Often, this category is either taken as basic or simply equated to more familiar kinds of entities such as events, processes, properties, or objects.

¹⁴ Form hereon, I shall drop the qualifier "token" unless there is a specific reason not to. This is because my concern in this section is almost exclusively with particular instances of mental states.

Nevertheless, there have been some attempts to develop an ontology of states. In this regard, I would like to bring attention to a distinction that I deem to be particularly significant for the purposes of this paper. This is Thau's (2002, 2007) distinction between *instantial states* and *internal states*.¹⁵

According to Thau, an instancial state is a structured entity constituted by a thing instantiating some property or relation. For instance, when a tomato is red, the tomato instantiates the property of being red. In this case, we can talk about the tomato's state of being red. Instancial states are thus structured and derived entities. Ontologically speaking, they amount to nothing but a thing's instantiation of some property or relation. As Thau puts it, "the state of the tomato's being red is not some second thing distinct from the tomato in virtue of which it is red; rather, it's *nothing more than* the tomato's being red" (2002, 60, my emphasis).

In contrast, an internal state is "something more like a proper part, or the condition of a proper part, of a thing" (*Ibidem*, 61). Thau offers Turing machine states and brain states as examples:

A state of a (physically realized) Turing machine isn't some relation the machine bears to some other thing; it's a proper part, or the condition of some proper part, of the machine. And, similarly, a state of the brain isn't some relation the brain bears to some other thing; it's something like a proper part, or the condition of some proper part, of the brain

(Thau 2002, p. 61).

¹⁵ Steward (1997) does make some remarks on the ontological status of states that are close to Thau's distinction (see also Nida-Rümelin 2016).

The existence of internal states requires more than the instantiation of a property or relation. It requires that “there be some particular that *is* the state” (Thau 2002, 61).

When applying this distinction to the ontological status of mental states, we get what I have called the instantial mental states view (INSTANTIAL VIEW) and the internal mental states view (INTERNAL VIEW). Roughly, we can express the contrast between these views as follows: On INSTANTIAL VIEW, *subjects are in mental states*; on INTERNAL VIEW, *mental states are in subjects*. It is though necessary to explicate these two views in more detail.

On INSTANTIAL VIEW, a subject’s mental state amounts to nothing but the instantiation of a mental property by that subject. It is akin to what Armstrong (1993; 1997) calls a fact or a state of affair. Moreover, if a subject’s mental state can be said to *occur* or *take place*, then it seems reasonable to claim that it has a temporal aspect. In other words, there is a specific time at which a subject’s mental state occurs. Thus, mental states are *structured* fact-like entities constituted by a subject, a mental property, and a time. They only exist if and when subjects instantiate mental properties at specific times.

On INSTANTIAL VIEW, mental states do not constitute a fundamental ontological category, but they are reducible to more fundamental entities: subjects, and their properties. Thus, to say that one has the perception of a blue sky at a certain time *t* is simply to say that one is instantiating the mental property of *perceiving a blue sky* at *t*.¹⁶

¹⁶ The reader might have noticed that the ontological structure of token mental states resembles the ontological structure of events. To some, events are complex entities that can be understood as either (a) exemplifications of a property by a substance (Kim 1976) or (b) complex tropes (Bennett 1988). If one thinks that events have the

On INTERNAL VIEW, talk of mental states is not simply a variant of our talk about subjects and their mental properties. Instead, subjects' mental states are particulars that occur wholly inside the subject and in virtue of which the subject bears mental properties. If I have a visual perception of a blue sky, this means that I have an internal particular possessing a specific mental property (e.g., the property of representing the sky as blue or the phenomenal property of blueness) in virtue of which I perceive the blue sky. However, what kind of particulars mental states are supposed to be is not easy to pin down. One candidate is physical processes in the brain, but this need not be the case. Arguably, INTERNAL VIEW is compatible with any metaphysics of mind. At any rate, it is important to note that, mental states are mental particulars (i.e., bearers of mental properties) according to INTERNAL VIEW. Metaphysically speaking, mental states are located *inside* the subject. They are hierarchically situated 'below' the level of the subject's mental properties (indeed, they ground the subject's mental properties).

4.2 The Argument from Instantial States

The distinction between INSTANTIAL VIEW and INTERNAL VIEW has important implications for our target question ("does a pre-reflective awareness of a token mental state imply an awareness of the subject whose state it is?").

Consider the question through the lens of INSTANTIAL VIEW. There is a straightforward sense in which one's awareness of one's token mental states implies an

structure Kim or Bennet propose, then one can safely regard instancial mental states as a subclass of *events* that essentially involve subjects instantiating mental properties over a time. For my part, since I am primarily concerned with the category of states, I shall remain neutral on whether the latter is identical to the category of events.

awareness of oneself. A mental state is a structured and ontologically derived entity that has the subject among its constituents. For me to be aware of my visual perception of a blue sky is *just* for me to be aware of myself visually perceiving the blue sky at the time of the perception's occurrence. INSTANTIAL VIEW naturally leads to the idea that every awareness of a mental state is an awareness of the subject whose state it is because (ontologically speaking) mental states are subject-involving.

If we take the target question in light of the INTERNAL VIEW, however, its positive evaluation is not straightforward. Although they might be thought to be states of the subject and, furthermore, states that the subject undergoes, this is something that their ontological status does not make transparent. There is no guarantee that I become aware of myself when I become aware of the internal particular that is my state of perceiving a blue sky. Thus, INTERNAL VIEW's construal of mental states naturally leads to a negative answer to our target question.

Note that I am not claiming that INTERNAL VIEW implies that the claim that an awareness of a token mental state is an awareness of its bearer is false. Rather, I am claiming that the truth of such a claim cannot be derived from its ontology of mental states. Furthermore, one would be led to reject the claim if one were to assess it solely on the basis of ontological considerations about mental states.

If what I have said so far is correct, then by endorsing the instancial view, a straightforward Rosenthalian argument opens up in favor of E:

- (1) Pre-reflective self-consciousness involves an awareness of the subject's token mental state (NE).
- (2) Token mental states are instancial states of the subject.

(3) Instantial states are (ontologically speaking) subject-involving.

Therefore

(4) Pre-reflective self-consciousness involves an awareness of the subject.

(5) A form of self-consciousness that involves an awareness of the subject is egological.

Therefore

(6) Pre-reflective self-consciousness is egological (E).

Call this the *argument from instancial states for E*. The argument is clearly valid. The premises do entail E. The question, of course, is whether they are true. I believe that I have already provided proper support for premises 1, 3, and 5.¹⁷ Because premise 4 follows from preceding premises, what remains to defend is premise 2.

4.3 Defending Premise 2

Premise 2 of the *argument from instancial states for E* maintains that mental states are instancial states. But, why should we think so? After all, the idea that mental states are internal states of the subject appears to be part of the orthodoxy in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind. Debates in this area are standardly couched in terminology that strongly suggests that mental states are internal mental particulars. Consider the debate around the for-me-ness of experience. Philosophers are used to saying that experiences (as opposed to unconscious mental states) are not just taking place *in me*, but they are also *for me* (Kriegel 2011, 62; Sebastián 2012, sec. 1; Zahavi 2018, sec. 2).

¹⁷ Moreover, something more will be said in Section 5.

Aside from the orthodoxy in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, do we have some reason to adopt INTERNAL VIEW? I do not think so. In fact, we have good reason to think that the subject's mental states—understood as states that can, in principle, be the target of pre-reflective self-consciousness—are instancial states rather than internal states.¹⁸

To begin with, it seems unobjectionable that we can talk of subjects' mental states as instancial states. It is, however, much less clear that we can talk of subjects' mental states as internal states. To borrow from Thau, "if we don't simply conflate instancial states with internal states, some argument is needed for the claim that mental states are internal states" (2007, 608). And, in fact, mental states are not the obvious bearers of mental properties (see Steward 1997, 257).

The above suggests that the existence of instancial mental states is pacific, while the existence of internal mental states is more controversial. I thus contend that the burden of proof is on proponents of INTERNAL VIEW. They must demonstrate that mental states are not just subjects' instantiations of mental properties at a certain time. Accordingly, in lack of compelling grounds, we should regard INSTANTIAL VIEW as our default position when it comes to the ontology of mental states.

¹⁸ It is sometimes claimed that unconscious mental states must be divided into those mental states that can become conscious and those that cannot. The former might be called unconscious personal mental states, while the latter might be called sub-personal mental states. I take the two views at issue as they are primarily concerned with the ontological status of both conscious mental states and unconscious personal mental states but not with the ontological status of sub-personal states. In fact, it might well be that sub-personal states are internal states. However, in a significant sense, they are not properly states of the subject (that is, either states that the subject is in or that are in the subject).

Defenders of INTERNAL VIEW might claim that internal mental states are a posit of folk psychology. The reasoning could be as follows. Folk psychology appeals to mental states to explain our behavior and our actions. It then seems that folk psychology confers a certain causal power to mental states. And, to have causal power, mental states must be construed as internal particulars rather than as supposedly fact-like entities. However, it is not obvious at all that the mental states postulated in folk psychology are internal particulars, let alone that they must be internal particulars to play a causal role. Following Steward, we might think that

folk psychology contains no commitment whatever to token propositional attitude states, understood as particular entities which combine to produce actions. What it contains are predicates of a special kind—‘believes that p’, ‘desires that q’, and so on—whose nominalized forms, ‘believing that p’, ‘desiring that q’, etc., refer to properties, a person’s possession of which can be causally relevant to what she does and says

(Steward 1997, 253).

Thus, it does not seem that folk psychology takes a stance in favor of INTERNAL VIEW.

Another reason for embracing INSTANTIAL VIEW concerns a thesis that INTERNAL VIEW is committed to. We can call this the *priority of state consciousness thesis* (PSC). PSC is a claim about the relationship between creature consciousness (consciousness attributed to subjects) and state consciousness (consciousness attributed to mental states). More precisely, PSC is a non-causal priority claim. It claims that a subject instantiates the property of creature-consciousness *because* one of its mental states instantiates the property of state-consciousness. In

this sense, PSC is also an explanatory claim. Once one has explained what makes a mental state conscious, one has also explained what makes the subject conscious.

As mentioned, INTERNAL VIEW is committed to PSC. Given that mental properties are supposed to be primarily borne by mental states (and, only secondarily borne by subjects), INTERNAL VIEW implies that state consciousness is ontologically prior to creature consciousness. In contrast, proponents of INSTANTIAL VIEW need not hold to PSC because INSTANTIAL VIEW construes of the subject as the primary bearer of mental properties.

INSTANTIAL VIEW's commitment to PSC undermines its plausibility. This is because PSC is problematic in, at least, two ways. First, PSC is in tension (if not plainly inconsistent) with the view that pre-reflective self-consciousness is constitutively involved in conscious experiences. That is, PSC is in tension with subjectivism about phenomenal character (SUBJ). On SUBJ, the subject's pre-reflective consciousness of their occurrent mental state is typically not taken to be a necessary condition for that mental state's being conscious. Rather, it is taken to be what *makes* the mental state conscious. Taking for granted that the property of being conscious of a mental state is a property borne by subjects means that state-consciousness obtains in virtue of (a kind of) creature-consciousness. And, this conflicts with PSC.¹⁹ If PSC is true, then SUBJ is threatened. This renders PSC a worrying thesis (at least, in the context of the present debate).

Second, at the heart of PSC, is the idea that consciousness can *literally* be a property of token mental states. This is though far from obviously the case. Indeed, there are reasons to be skeptical. Although several scholars endorse this claim, it is rarely explicitly defended. It also

¹⁹ For an extended discussion of this conflict see (XXX).

remains unclear what argument could, in fact, defend it. It seems that neither (a) our *talk* about state-consciousness nor (b) the fact that state-consciousness is part of the conceptual-ontological framework in current discussions of consciousness can justify that consciousness is a property of mental states.²⁰ Moreover, when one regards consciousness as a property of mental states, one appears to be ascribing the predicate “is conscious” to the mental states themselves (Janzen 2008, pp. 18–19). However, Bennett and Hacker (2003) have argued persuasively that psychological predicates apply only to the whole subject and not to their constitutive parts (e.g., properties or states) (2003, 72).

To be sure, the claim in question is a conceptual one. Bennett and Hacker call this the *mereological principle* (MP). They stress that MP can be changed only by stipulation, but not “without changing a great deal else [and] thereby altogether changing the meanings of our words and the structure of a multitude of familiar concepts” (2003, p. 81). The upshot is that, if one accepts MP (and I see no reason not to), then talking of a mental state being conscious is *meaningless*. That is, unless it is metaphorical or metonymic talk (i.e., shorthand for referring to either a mental state *of which the subject is conscious* or a mental state that the subject is in *while conscious*). Mental states simply do not seem to be the right sort of entities to ascribe the

²⁰ As for the former, Janzen has noted that our use of expressions such as “conscious mental state” or “being in conscious mental states” does not warrant the conclusion that mental states themselves possess the property of consciousness (2008, p. 17). Concerning the latter, Nida-Rumelin (2007) argues that all discussions about conscious mental states can be conceptually and ontologically reduced to talks about conscious subjects and their properties without any loss. I contend though that the opposite is not the case. The concept of a conscious subject is implicated in the concept of state consciousness (at least, in its phenomenal sense). As Nagel famously states, “fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is *to be* that organism—something it is like *for* the organism” (1974, p. 435).

property of consciousness to. While this may or may not serve as a *reductio ad absurdum* of PSC, it does certainly make PSC an avoidable claim.

In sum, the reasons behind the claim that mental states are instancial states are that (i) INSTANTIAL VIEW is less controversial than INTERNAL VIEW and that (ii) there is a problematic claim—PSC—to which INTERNAL VIEW is committed, while INSTANTIAL VIEW is not.²¹ I recognize that these reasons fall short of a direct argument in favor of INSTANTIAL VIEW. Still, it should be sufficiently clear that they can be used to make an indirect argument for INSTANTIAL VIEW. I think that it is safe to conclude that premise 2 in the *argument from instancial states for E* (token mental states are instancial states of the subject) rests on defeasible grounds.

5. From metaphysics to phenomenology? A reply to a concern

The core of my Rosenthalian argument in favour of E should now be clear: one's pre-reflective awareness of one's token mental state (or, which is the same, one's experience) entails an awareness of oneself because token mental states are necessarily subject-involving. In other words, this argument derives E from NE by elucidating the ontological category of mental states.

²¹ Another argument for the INSTANTIAL VIEW could stem from its similarity with the view that mental states are Kimean event (see fn 16 for the acknowledgment of this similarity). Taylor (2020), in fact, has pointed out that construing mental states as exemplifications of properties gives us a clear explanation of a couple of intuitive data about the relationship between these states and their subjects. However, there is a little work to show that the INTERNAL VIEW is unable to explain these data equally clearly. Unfortunately, I had not the space to accomplish such a work here.

What I want to do now is to clarify and defend the argument further. I will do this by dismissing a potential objection that could be raised against it.

One might worry that this metaphysical root from NE to E is too quick. Specifying the ontological status of mental state might be insufficient to establish a phenomenological thesis like E, for metaphysics is not a good guide to phenomenology. Robert Howell (2019) has recently made a criticism of this sort. According to him, the idea that E (subject luminosity in his own terminology) necessarily follows from NE (state luminosity in his own view) can only be true if we adopt a very weak sense of self-awareness:

State luminosity tells us that if a subject is having a conscious state, the subject is aware of that state. Since that state is actually a state of the subject, in some sense the subject is aware of herself. Arguably all it takes to be aware of something is to be aware of a property of the thing. But this is a very weak notion of self-awareness. One can clearly be aware of a property that happens to belong to an object without really being aware of the object. In some limited sense I am Merlin-aware when I hear Merlin the cat's meow. Even if I'm not aware of the fact that cats meow, much less that Merlin just meowed, by being aware of a sound (which happens to be a meow which happens to be produced by Merlin) I am Merlin-aware. This is the level of self-awareness granted by state luminosity, but that sort of awareness is much less robust than what is intended in subject luminosity.

(Howell 2019, 164)

Howell's criticism is actually a variant of an objection developed some years before against Chisholm's (1969) and Shoemaker's (1996) stances on Hume's famous denial of the perceivability of the self in introspection. Here is the original formulation:

I have granted the metaphysical thesis that mental states are ultimately properties of the self. Metaphysics, however, is not always reflected in phenomenology. [...] One can perceive the cat's meow without perceiving the cat, and it is unfortunately often the case that one can perceive a smell without perceiving that which is giving off the smell. (Often, finding the cat solves both of these problems.) *Perceiving something's properties is simply not sufficient for perceiving the thing itself.*

(Howell 2010, 469-472, my italics)

Such a formulation is inadequate in our context, as pre-reflective self-consciousness is taken to be non-objectual and, to that extent, non-perceptual. E, thus, is consistent with the elusiveness of the self, that is, with the claim mentioned above that the self cannot perceive themselves in introspection.²² Nevertheless, the main concern can arguably be generalized and applied to pre-reflective awareness too, as Howell (2019) does in fact: the mere metaphysical fact that a mental state is ultimately a property of a subject does not guarantee that the latter is pre-reflectively aware of themselves by being pre-reflectively aware of such a mental state.²³

²² To use an aptly expression from Gottlieb (2022), according to E, there is self-experience (the claim that the self shows up in the experience) despite self-elusiveness.

²³ A similar point is made by Duncan (2018, 95).

This worry, however, is ill-founded. Although my argument might seem to be vulnerable to Howell's criticism, upon close examination, it is not. I agree with Howell when he claims that one could be aware of a property that happens to belong to an object without really being aware of such an object. Thus, it would be true that taking occurrent mental states as properties of the subject will not suffice to make the subject aware of themselves — unless a very loose sense of self-awareness is in place. But I do not take occurrent mental states to be properties of the subject, for I do not take mental states to be properties at all. In the view I proposed, states (be they mental or not) do not fall under the ontological category of properties but, rather, of facts or, eventually, events (in Kim's sense). According to the INSTANTIAL VIEW, therefore, a mental state is a non-basic entity constituted by three more basic entities: a subject, a mental property, and a time *t*. The difference might be subtler but is substantial. For, while it is possible to be (pre-reflectively) aware of a property without being (pre-reflectively) aware of its bearer, it is not possible to be (pre-reflectively) aware of a fact or an event without being (pre-reflectively) aware of its constituents, or so I contend. Properties and their bearers are usually taken to belong to two different fundamental ontological categories: properties and substances.²⁴ So, a property is something over and above its bearer, and it might well be that an awareness of the former is opaque concerning the latter. A fact, though, is not something over and above the entities which go to make up it. It makes little sense to say that I am aware of a fact but not of what constitutes such a fact. Howell's criticism, thus, begs the question against my metaphysical root from NE to E.

²⁴ But see the bundle-theory of objects to a denial of this claim.

It might be replied that one can effectively be pre-reflectively aware of a fact or an event without necessarily being aware of its constituents. Again, one might find evidence for this contention in Howell (2010). In criticizing Shoemaker's 'broad' view of perception, indeed, he claims:

One can, in fact, perceive the sun's rising without perceiving the sun. At the moments before the sun itself peeks over the horizon, one can still perceive the sun's rising by noticing the cast of its rays or by perceiving the brightening of the eastern sky.

(Howell 2010, 472)

Leaving aside, again, the fact that Howell talks here about perceptual awareness, is his statement correct? Is it true that one is aware of the sun's rising when one is not aware of the sun but just of the brightening of the eastern sky? Perhaps it is on certain senses of awareness but not on the pre-reflective sense of awareness. Howell's example is an instance of an awareness of a phenomenon *through* its effect. And this kind of awareness, besides being *indirect*, requires an *inference* from the effect to its cause to obtain. When, for instance, we hear a cadenced ticking coming from the roof, we can also claim to be (indirectly) aware of heavy rain falling, but this is *only because* we know that such a particular sound coming from the roof is caused (at least typically) by the rain falling.

Similarly, we can be (indirectly) aware of the sun's rising by being aware of the brightening of the eastern sky, but, again, this is so *only because* we know that the latter is (typically) an effect of the sun's rising. Someone unaware of such a causal relation will not be aware of the

sun's rising by noticing the brightening of the eastern sky. It is clear, however, that such an indirect and inferential awareness cannot be an instance of pre-reflective awareness, as the latter is standardly taken to be direct and non-inferential. In the sense of awareness relevant to the debate between NE and E, thus, an awareness of a fact without an awareness of the constituents of such a fact is impossible.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I defended the egological view of pre-reflective self-consciousness (E). In section 3, I considered extant motivations for E. I then identified a promising line of reasoning for E in a theoretical argument provided by Rosenthal (1997). The problem with this argument was a lack of support for its central premise: the claim that a pre-reflective awareness of a token mental state implies an awareness of its bearer. In Section 4, I made a case for this premise by developing a qualified Rosenthalian argument for E. I called this the *argument from instantial states for E*. I built my case on a proper clarification of the ontology of mental states. I proceeded in three stages. In the first stage, I drew on Thau's distinction between instantial states and internal states to present two accounts of mental states: INSTANTIAL VIEW and INTERNAL VIEW. In the second stage, I argued that INSTANTIAL VIEW supports the crucial premise in my Rosenthalian argument because it construes of mental states as structured fact-like entities whose subjects are among their constituents. In the third stage, I provided reasons to adopt INSTANTIAL VIEW instead of INTERNAL VIEW. In Section 5, I showed that the *argument from instantial states for E* is not undermined by the consideration raised by Robert Howell (2010; 2019), as my argument must be distinguished from the one that obtains E from NE by construing mental states as properties of subjects of experience.

I conclude that the *argument from instantial states for E* leaves us with a solid theoretical argument for the claim that pre-reflective self-consciousness is constitutively egological. Some readers may still not be entirely convinced. If so, at the very least, I hope to have persuaded them that the debate over the object of pre-reflective self-consciousness would benefit from a more explicit discussion of the ontology of mental states.

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