

Self-awareness: acquaintance, intentionality, representation, relation

Galen Strawson

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**Abstract** This paper endorses and expounds the widely held view that all experience involves pre-reflective self-consciousness or self-awareness. It argues that pre-reflective self-consciousness does not involve any sort of experience of ‘me-ness’ or ‘mine-ness’, and that all self-consciousness is essentially relational, essentially has the subject as intentional object, essentially involves representation, in particular self-representation, and ‘immediate acquaintance’, in particular immediate self-acquaintance; and cannot in one primordial respect involve a mistake on the part of the subject of who it is.

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‘In every act of sensation, reasoning, or thinking, we are conscious to ourselves of our own being; and, in this matter, come not short of the highest degree of certainty’ (Locke 1689–1700: §4.9.3)

‘All our sensations [are] simultaneously the soul’s sensations of itself’ (Ulrici 1866: 1.284).  
[‘alle unsere Empfindungen zugleich Selbstempfindungen der Seele’]

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In 2019 Klaus Viertbauer and Stefan Lang asked me a series of questions<sup>1</sup> which I have slightly reformulated as follows.

[Q1] Does self-awareness accompany all conscious states (conscious experience)?

[Q2] Does pre-reflective self-awareness exist?

[Q3] Does pre-reflective self-awareness include a sense of ‘me-ness’—does it include some sort of apprehension of the subject as oneself?

[Q4] Does pre-reflective self-awareness include a sense of ‘mine-ness’—does it include some sort of apprehension of the experience as one’s own?

[Q5] Does the structure of self-consciousness involve representation?

[Q6] Does the structure of self-consciousness involve self-representation?

[Q7] Does the structure of self-consciousness involve (immediate) acquaintance?

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<sup>1</sup> ‘1. Is it true that self-awareness accompanies all (phenomenal) conscious states? 2. Does so called (peripheral) inner awareness or pre-reflective self-awareness exist? 3. Does (peripheral) inner awareness include a sense of mine-ness or me-ness? (For example: Does self-awareness include awareness of a *subject* of experience (me-ness) or awareness of the experience as one’s *own* experience (mine-ness)? Or: Is self-awareness “anonymous”: Does self-awareness consist in the awareness of experience (or consciousness), but does it not include a sense of mine-ness or me-ness? 4. The structure of self-consciousness: Representation, Self-representation, Acquaintance or non-relational? Is the danger of misrepresentation a threat for explaining self-consciousness?’

[Q8] Is self-consciousness a non-relational phenomenon?

[Q9] Is the danger of misrepresentation a threat when it comes to self-consciousness?

These are Yes/No questions (unlike ‘What is the meaning of life?’), and the answers I propose are as follows. [Q1] Yes. [Q2] Yes. [Q3] No. [Q4] No. [Q5] Yes (?). [Q6] Yes (?). [Q7] Yes. [Q8] No. [Q9] No. I propose, in other words, to endorse the following views:

[1] All conscious experience involves self-awareness, i.e. awareness, on the part of the subject of the experience, of itself.

[2] There is such a thing as pre-reflective self-awareness.

[3] Basic pre-reflective self-awareness does not include any sort of (phenomenological) apprehension of the subject *as oneself*.

[4] Basic pre-reflective self-awareness does not include any sort of (phenomenological) apprehension of the experience *as one’s own*.

[5] Self-consciousness (both ‘full’ self-consciousness and pre-reflective self-consciousness) essentially involves representation. (?)

[6] Self-consciousness (both ‘full’ self-consciousness and pre-reflective self-consciousness) essentially involves self-representation. (?)

[7] Self-consciousness essentially involves a certain kind of ‘immediate acquaintance’—immediate self-acquaintance.

[8] Self-consciousness is an essentially relational phenomenon.

[9] Self-consciousness cannot involve a mistake about who one is.<sup>2</sup>

I’ll explain the question marks appended to [5] and [6] in §11 below.

Two immediate comments. (i) I’ll treat self-awareness and self-consciousness as equivalent terms, in line with the original questions. (In some contexts it’s more natural to use one, in other contexts the other.) (ii) I think it may be helpful, in the interests of full disclosure, to add

[10] In all self-consciousness the subject is the *intentional object* of its awareness.

to [1]–[9]. [10] follows immediately from [1], and equally [2], given that anything that awareness is awareness *of* is rightly said to be the object—i.e. the intentional object—of that awareness. If pre-reflective self-awareness exists, so also does pre-reflective intentionality, for the former is just a special case of the latter.

## 2

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<sup>2</sup> I have adapted the wording, in moving from [Q9] to [9], in recognition of what I believe to be the motivation behind [Q9]. I take it that the question is whether or not self-consciousness, or at least self-reference, is—in Sydney Shoemaker’s well known expression—‘immune to error’ through misidentification of the subject (Shoemaker 1968).

Some not only think that some of [1]–[10] are false. They doubt that they form a consistent set. They doubt, in other words, that [1]–[10] can all be true together. I suspect that some think that [7] is incompatible with [5] and [6], and perhaps even [8]. Others may think that [9] is incompatible with [8], [5], and [6].

Many, perhaps, think that [1] is false. I'll begin by arguing that there's an absolutely fundamental respect in which it's provably true, and indeed necessarily true. Then I'll try to show that it more or less directly entails [2]–[10].

Obviously I make no claim to originality. The view I favour has been held by many over thousands of years, in both the Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. The general issue has been the subject of a great deal of beautifully careful work over thousands of years. (It has also been constantly muddied by careless work.)

I'll speak mainly of 'the subject', meaning the subject of experience, rather than of 'the self'. I'll say shortly what I mean by 'experience'. I'll avoid using the term 'first-person' because I think it has caused a great deal of unnecessary confusion.

Many of the apparent disagreements in this debate are at bottom terminological. That doesn't prevent them from being fierce. My response to this is to be plodding—repetitive with variation—but philosophers have an infinite capacity to misunderstand, and I'm doubtful that the debate can be freed from terminological turmoil.

## 2

Before we consider

[1] All conscious experience involves self-awareness

or equivalently

[1] all conscious experience involves self-experience

it will do no harm to take a step back to the foundational necessary truth that

[0] all conscious experience involves a subject of experience.

[0] is a necessary truth simply because experience is necessarily experience-*for*—for someone-or-something; experience is necessarily experienced; experience is necessarily experiencing.<sup>3</sup>

What do I mean by 'conscious experience' or simply 'experience' (I take it to be true by definition that all experience is conscious experience)? I mean what many mean by 'consciousness': experiential 'what-it-is-likeness' of any sort whatever, any sort of feeling or sentience, phenomenological goings-on of any sort at all, however primitive.<sup>4</sup> A sea-snail has experience, if there is something it is like, experientially, to be a sea-snail. I'll assume, here, that there is. If you prefer you can substitute a mouse or a cat or a new-born baby.

Someone might try to challenge [0] by granting that

[11] experience entails *subjectivity*

but denying that

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<sup>3</sup> Shoemaker puts it well: it is 'an obvious conceptual truth that an experiencing is necessarily an experiencing by a subject of experience, and involves that subject as intimately as a branch-bending involves a branch' (1986: 10). I'm told that Plato makes the point.

<sup>4</sup> Schlick in 1936 notes that this broad use of 'experience' 'is a comparatively modern use of the word' (1936: 353). It is well established now.

[12] subjectivity entails a *subject*.

The best reply to this is to clarify the sense in which [12] is already true if [11] is: the fundamental sense of ‘subject’ in which the presence of subjectivity already entails the presence of a subject.

It may be said that [12] is preferable to [11] because ‘subject’ is a grammatical count noun and (therefore) involves a metaphysical commitment that the word ‘subjectivity’, a mass term, does not have. This resembles Lichtenberg’s famous but entirely mistaken objection to Descartes.<sup>5</sup> My reply is simple: the minimal conception of the subject that I endorse is no more metaphysically committed than the thinnest viable notion of subjectivity.

Take any experience. It must involve a subject, as [0] says, a *haver*, (a) someone-or-something who/that has it. But one certainly doesn’t have to think that the being of the subject is in any way additional to, ontically over and above, the being of the episode of experience. There is always a legitimate *conceptual* distinction between the subject or haver of an experience and the content of the experience. There is, if you like, an irreducible subject-content *polarity*. It does *not* follow that the experience involves any irreducible ontic *plurality*.<sup>6</sup>

### 3

Given this understanding of what a subject is,<sup>7</sup> [12] is guaranteed: subjectivity entails a subject. The subject may be very short-lived. It may last no longer than the experience. Still it must be there. Certainly *Hume* does not disagree.<sup>8</sup> Even Buddhists who believe that all existence consists in momentary *dharmas* can acknowledge a subject in this sense, while denying any sort of persisting subject.

So [0], [11], and [12] are all true. Whenever there is an experience there is necessarily—trivially—a *having* of the experience, hence necessarily a *haver* of the experience, i.e. a *subject* of the experience.

Back now to

[1] all experience involves self-awareness—self-experience

the claim—to expand [1] into a more provocative form—that

[1] every experience involves experience, on the part of the subject, of itself, and, furthermore, experience of itself considered specifically as subject.

How can I include ‘considered specifically as subject’ in the expansion of [1], given that I think that [1] is true even in the case of sea-snails (which we are assuming to be subjects of experience) or new-born babies? I will try to explain.

### 4

It often helps to have different formulations of a claim under investigation, and I propose now to introduce the further term ‘subject-experience’. ‘Subject-experience’ is short for ‘experience on the part of a subject of itself considered specifically as subject’. It’s a name for a certain type of experience.

Here some will have trouble with the word ‘as’. Many think the occurrence of ‘as’ in the expression ‘experience of \_\_\_\_\_ as \_\_\_\_\_’ always indicates the deployment of a *concept*, in this case the concept

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Strawson 2009: 140.

<sup>6</sup> By ‘content of experience’ I mean what is sometimes called ‘internal content’: that which I fully share with my philosophical ‘Twin’ on ‘Twin Earth’ (see Putnam 1975).

<sup>7</sup> It’s shared, I believe, by Spinoza, Kant (at least at one point), William James, post-1921 Russell, Durant Drake, C. A. Strong, and many others—including (this will surprise some) Descartes. I argue for it at some length in Strawson 2003.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Strawson 2011.

SUBJECT. There is, however, a legitimate and crucial use of ‘as’ in these contexts that has no such implication.<sup>9</sup> I hope this will become clear.

[1], in any case, now becomes

[1] all experience involves subject-experience.

This is the form of [1] I will work with.

## 5

Is [1] true? To get the answer, consider a subject of experience *s* and the property of having *F*-experience, where *F*-experience is a particular qualitative or phenomenological type of experience. I’ll call properties like the property of having *F*-experience ‘experiential properties’.

Suppose a particular *F*-experience is had by a particular subject *s*:

*s* has *F*-experience

and consider the following intentionally ponderous (repetitive) argument. I think everyone will agree that its first premiss, at least, is a necessary truth:

[13] When *s* has *F*-experience, having *F*-experience is a property of *s*.<sup>10</sup>

Having *F*-experience is in fact an intrinsic<sup>11</sup> property of *s*. I’ll take this as read. I think, in fact, that the distinction between an object or entity and its intrinsic properties—its *qualities*—is ultimately metaphysically superficial, but this doesn’t mean that one can’t perfectly properly use the language of object and property. This table is brown: true. This subject is having *F*-experience: true.<sup>12</sup>

Here’s the second premiss.

[14] In having the property of having *F*-experience, *s* has experience of the property of having *F*-experience.

I take it that this is also a necessary truth. One can also say that

[14\*] in having the property of having *F*-experience, *s* has experience of *having* the property of having *F*-experience

but there is no need to do this here.

I think some will flinch at [14], or perhaps scoff, but it’s really just one way of expressing a very old idea. Here I choose to state it in a way that makes it seem vulnerable, because the present aim is full exposure of what is involved in the claim that all conscious experience involves self-awareness.

Let me try to explain.

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Strawson 2010: 210, Montague 2016: 44.

<sup>10</sup> This talk of experience being a property of the subject is wholly compatible with the ‘thin’ account of a subject that I favour, according to which the total being of the subject is in the final analysis identical with the total being of the experience. The account requires fairly careful exposition (see Strawson 2003).

<sup>11</sup> I take this use of ‘intrinsic’ to be compatible with *Indra’s Net*, the view that everything in the universe is essentially interconnected with everything else in such a way that no *proper part* of the universe can strictly speaking be said to have intrinsic properties. (To combine intrinsic properties with *Indra’s Net*, it’s sufficient to endorse ‘thing monism’, the view that there is only one thing: the universe.)

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Strawson 2008 and at greater length Strawson 2021a.

First, and crucially, when *s* has experience of the property of having *F*-experience in the sense of [14], its having this experience doesn't involve any sort of *introspection*.<sup>13</sup> It just involves its having *F*-experience. It doesn't involve any sort of higher-order mental operation, any (relatively sophisticated) cognitive distancing move of the sort definitive of introspection. It doesn't involve *s*'s being fully self-conscious in the sense of 'self-conscious' that is standard in analytic philosophy. It doesn't in other words involve *s*'s apprehending itself specifically and explicitly *as itself*, deploying (in some manner) the concept I or ME or MYSELF or some equivalent. So too it doesn't involve *s*'s possessing the concept SUBJECT or the concept PROPERTY. If a new born baby has *F*-experience, it necessarily experiences (having) the property of having *F*-experience, because (again) having *F*-experience just is experiencing having the property. It follows immediately (boringly, trivially) from the nature of experiential properties like having *F*-experience that it is correct to say that to have such a property is to experience having it.

Having experience of the property of having *F*-experience is itself a property, and it is itself an experiential property, and one can generate a nominal infinite regress—if one wishes. There is, however, nothing problematic about it. It's no more problematic than the fact that  $\Box p$  (*necessarily p*) entails  $\Box \Box p$  (*necessarily necessarily p*) and hence  $\Box \Box \Box p$  (*necessarily necessarily necessarily p*) ... in modal logic S5. More simply: the regress never happens, because the nominally distinct states are in fact identical (Aristotle saw this long ago).

This is I believe one good—designedly vulnerable—way to characterize the so-called *luminosity* or *self-luminosity* of experience or consciousness.<sup>14</sup> Whether one is a human being or a sea-snail or a spider

[14] one can't have *F*-experience, i.e. have the property of having *F*-experience, without having experience of the property of having *F*-experience.

Understood as it's intended, [14] is trivial. It doesn't take one to a higher-order; it certainly doesn't require conceiving of the experience *as* an experience.

'Stock objection. When you dance, you don't dance dancing. So too, when you experience, you don't experience experiencing.'

Reply. No. When you experience you do experience experiencing, because experiencing just is (of course) experiencing experiencing (again no higher-order operation). If you find that this claim somehow stalls your thinking, then (I say) you haven't yet heard it right. It is in fact equivalent to 'experiencing is experiencing', which has, like all tautologies, the virtue of being certainly true.

The argument continues as follows:

[15] experience of a property's being occurrently instantiated by a thing is experience of that thing.

Therefore

[16] in all experience, a subject of experience experiences itself.

Furthermore

[17] in all experience, a subject of experience experiences itself in its specifically mental being.

For of course

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<sup>13</sup> 'Introspection' (another term that has been much abused) is utterly different from immediate acquaintance, on which it essentially depends for all its content.

<sup>14</sup> On luminosity, see e.g. Albahari 2009, Strawson 2013. This ancient use of the term 'luminosity' is not Williamson's recent use (Williamson 2000), but I take it that luminosity in this sense does entail luminosity in Williamson's sense (I understand the word 'know' in such a way that luminosity in this sense entails luminosity in Williamson's sense).

[18] experience is a mental property

and given the definition of subject-experience on p. 5 we can re-express [16] as

[16] in all experience, a subject of experience has subject-experience

which is a version of

[1] all experience involves subject-experience.

I take it that it follows immediately (given the ‘all’) that

[2] there is such a thing as pre-reflective self-awareness

simply because there are many creatures that have experience that are not reflective at all, and lack the capacity to think of themselves specifically *as themselves* in the fully self-conscious way, and so also lack the capacity to think of anything specifically *as their own*. We may in fact take it as definitive of pre-reflective self-awareness that

[3] basic pre-reflective self-awareness does not include any sort of apprehension of the subject *as oneself*

and equally that

[4] basic pre-reflective self-awareness does not include any sort of apprehension of the experience *as one’s own*.<sup>15</sup>

This entails—or simply says in other words—that

[3] basic pre-reflective self-awareness does not include any sense of *me-ness*.

[4] basic pre-reflective self-awareness does not include any sense of *mine-ness*.

Some may wish to use ‘me-ness’ and ‘mine-ness’ differently. They may say that I beg the question in taking lack of any sense of me-ness or mine-ness as in effect *definitive* of pre-reflective self-awareness. Our terminological difference will then be clear. What is good is that we fully agree that *s* is in pre-reflective self-awareness aware of itself considered in its specifically mental being (in respect of its having a certain experiential, hence mental, property), and indeed of itself specifically in respect of its being a subject of experience.

## 6

We have, then, an argument for [1]. I think it also delivers a good characterization of what is now often called *the minimal self*. I think it also delivers a good characterization of the absolutely minimal *sense* of self. I think in fact that the existence of the minimal self (MS for short) may be said to *consist* in the obtaining of the minimal sense of self (MSOS for short) which obtains whenever there is any

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<sup>15</sup> These are *phenomenological* remarks. One might allow a *behavioural* sense in which a primitive experiencing creature can be said to apprehend its experience as its own, simply insofar as it reacts appropriately to experienced environmental threats.

experience: [MS = MSOS]. The minimal sense of self may in turn be identified with the existence of pre-reflective self-awareness (PRSA for short): [MS = MSOS = PRSA].

On this view, the minimal self is something that is essentially ‘live’ in the process of experience; it’s not to be thought of as an entity that continues in existence even when there’s no experiencing going on. One may want to conceive of the self *considered as a whole* as an entity that continues to exist when there’s no experiencing going on (most do). It doesn’t follow that one should conceive of the *minimal* self in this way (I don’t think one should think of ‘the self’ as a kind of marsupial with the ‘minimal self’ in its pouch). My sense is that most of those who have participated in the recent debate about the minimal self have had something more like the current ‘live’ conception of the minimal self in mind.

‘Objection. You’ve endorsed the view that the minimal sense of self doesn’t involve any sort of sense of me-ness or mine-ness. But it’s part of the very meaning of the phrase “sense of self” that to have a sense of self, truly a sense *of self*, entails having *some* sort of sense of me-ness or mine-ness.’

Reply. I have some sympathy with this (terminological) intuition. Should I perhaps allow that although [3] and [4] are true as stated, nevertheless

[a] a genuine sense of self necessarily includes some sort of sense of *me-ness*.

[b] a genuine sense of self necessarily includes some sort of sense of *mine-ness*?

To do this is to reject [MS = MSOS]—to allow that the existence of the minimal self doesn’t necessarily involve any sense of self. It’s a possible position. It’s in line with the idea that one may in a spiritually advanced (or pathologically depersonalized) state lose anything properly called ‘a sense of self’ even though one continues to be a being that is when conscious necessarily pre-reflectively self-aware. It’s in line with the (terminological) intuition that anything rightly called a self is essentially more than a subject of experience, because anything rightly called a *self* must indeed have some sort of *sense* of self, whereas a (mere, minimal) *subject* need not.

I choose nevertheless to reject [a] and [b] and say that all subjects do have a minimal sense of self simply in being pre-reflectively self-aware ([PRSA = MSOS]). They’re not only self-aware, they’re also aware of themselves specifically as mentally qualified entities, specifically insofar as they are subjects of experience (compare the self-awareness a kitten has insofar as she’s chasing her own tail). It’s a terminological decision: on the present terms, all subjects of experience have, when conscious, a (minimal) sense of self, whatever else is true of them: [PRSA = MSOS]. It’s an essential constitutive feature of subjectivity, right at the core. I’ve also suggested that [MS = MSOS]: that the minimal self is not well thought of as an entity (somehow embedded in the overall non-minimal self) that pre-exists [PRSA = MSOS]—an entity whose job is presumably to *generate* or *give rise* to [PRSA = MSOS]. Nor is it well thought of as an entity that pops into existence when PRSA obtains while being ontically distinct from PRSA. To this extent the solid noun-phrase ‘the minimal self’ may be misleading.

7

I’ve offered a purposefully—painfully—laborious articulation of the [MS = MSOS = PRSA] complex in [11]–[18] because I think that it’s helpful to do so if one wants to try to see what people have in mind when they talk about the pre-reflective self-awareness, the minimal self, and the minimal sense of self.

There are—once more time—richer conceptions of what it is to have a sense of self given which the minimal sense of self doesn’t make the grade. But we’re trying to characterize the absolutely minimal case, and the experience in question is, to repeat, experience, on the part of the subject, of itself specifically in its mental being, its specifically subject-of-experience-ish being (not its being specifically as something with fingers or a tail). One might say that it is experience of its own active *subjecting*. Chickens have such experience, assuming that there’s something it is like, experientially speaking, to be a chicken. So do spiders and sea snails, on the same assumption. So do cells, if there’s something it is like, experientially speaking, to be a cell.

‘Question. Is the self or subject really *phenomenologically* given in this case?’

Reply. Yes, in one unshiftable sense. For—to take one more run at it—there is

[i] an experiential or phenomenologically contentful going-on

that is of course

[ii] phenomenologically given to the subject (necessarily so, because its being so given is what constitutes its existence)

and that is

[iii] a property of or process in the subject

and is indeed

[iv] part of what constitutes the very being of the subject at that time.

So there is

[v] experience *of* the subject by or on the part of the subject

which is as such and of course (trivially)

[vi] genuinely *relational* experience of the subject,

i.e. experience that is of course (and trivially)

[vii] *intentionally of* the subject,

and it’s not

[viii] ‘merely’ or ‘purely’ relational experience of the subject,<sup>16</sup>

because it’s also

[ix] *phenomenologically qualified* experience of the subject,

and also, and therefore,

[x] phenomenologically qualified experience of the subject *considered specifically in respect of its mental being*

—since the existence of that phenomenological quality, i.e. the possession of the property of having that experience with that phenomenological character, is (= [iv]) part of what constitutes the very existence of the subject at that time. It’s also

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<sup>16</sup> One may be said to have ‘merely relational’ experience of *x* when *x* is indeed the thing that one’s experience is experience of, but one’s experience of it doesn’t furnish one with any idea of its nature (one’s idea of *x* is then, in eighteenth-century terms, a merely ‘relative’ idea).

[xi] *accurate* phenomenologically qualified experience of the subject considered specifically in its mental being

simply because the having of it is the knowing of its quality,<sup>17</sup> and—again (= [iv])—the phenomenological content is as it occurs part of the very being of the subject considered specifically in its mental being; just as every intrinsic property of a thing *x* is part of the very being of *x* at the time it is possessed. And in that fundamental sense the subject considered specifically in its mental being is not only phenomenologically given, immediately phenomenologically given, in the experience, it is also in being so given

[xii] given ‘as it is in itself’—at least in part.

We shouldn’t be afraid of this Fichtean note—or of the expression ‘as it is in itself’.

This is minimal presence to self: primordial awareness of self: the minimal sense of self. It isn’t as if a subject’s presence to self isn’t real or genuine unless it’s explicitly apprehended to be presence to self by the subject whose presence to self it is (one might as well say that a mirror doesn’t reflect anything unless it is aware that it does). This is what it is, *minimally*, to be conscious, to be conscious at all, to be an experiencing being of any sort at all, to exist *pour soi—für sich selbst*.

I hope that the idea is reasonably clear. It’s not in any tension with richer conceptions of presence to self—of the *pour soi*—of the kind that are at play in, for example, Sartrean agonizing, and that presuppose it.

## 8

So much for [1]–[4]. What about [5]–[10]? They claim that all self-consciousness—whether full, minimal, or something in between—essentially involves [5] *representation*, and indeed [6] *self-representation*; and also [7] *self-acquaintance*, and indeed *immediate* self-acquaintance; and is [8] an essentially *relational—self-relational*—and [10] *intentional* phenomenon; and is [9] in one fundamental respect *infallible*, inasmuch as one cannot fail to be aware of oneself when one takes oneself to be.

These claims raise more questions than I can deal with in this paper.<sup>18</sup> I’m going to argue—in the next four sections, and with certain reservations—that they’re all true, and that any disagreement about them must in the end turn out to be terminological. I think, more moderately, that they all have true readings. Plainly parts of my answer are already contained in [i]–[xii] above.

## 9

There is, from now on, no avoiding the terminological morass. But I want to approach the general issue of mental reflexivity indirectly by considering first of all an occurrent conscious thought that I’ve just purposefully had: the thought *this (very) thought is puzzling*. I’ll call it ‘*P*’. You can have a thought with the same form now. I’ve had thoughts with this form quite a few times. So far they have all been true. One day, perhaps, I’ll have a thought with this form that won’t be true. I look forward to it (it will be just as philosophically useful as *P*).

What can we say about *P*? It quite certainly *refers* to itself. It therefore necessarily *represents* itself in some manner ([5] and [6]). What about *acquaintance* ([7])? Can an occurrent thought, rather than a subject of experience, be said to be acquainted with anything? Probably not, but its occurrence can I think be said to *involve* acquaintance, and it seems reasonable to say that *P* does involve a kind of acquaintance (even though the acquaintance involves puzzlement!). *P* is quite certainly *about* itself: it is

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<sup>17</sup> This claim has absolutely nothing to do with the ‘myth of the given’ (see e.g. Strong 1923, Sellars 1956), which is indeed a myth (see Strawson 2021b: §9).

<sup>18</sup> I try to address some of them in a paper called ‘Self-intimation’ (2013).

therefore as we say *intentionally directed* at itself ([10]), and it is therefore and necessarily *relational*, indeed *self-relational*, and non-trivially so ([8]).<sup>19</sup> And its genuine occurrence guarantees that it is about itself in exactly the way it seems to be ([9]). It couldn't possibly not be about itself.

What about *representation*? Some say that one cannot properly talk of representation unless there is a possibility of misrepresentation, and that there is no possibility of misrepresentation in the case of thoughts like *P*. I can't, however, see any good reason to accept the claim that representation presupposes the possibility of misrepresentation, either in the particular case of *P* or in general. (It seems a bit like the obviously false claim, made by some Wittgensteinians, that one can't be said to know that one is feeling pain because one can't possibly be wrong.) I think the notion of representation is far more general and powerful than this, and effortlessly encompasses cases in which one can't be wrong alongside cases in which one can be wrong. *P* certainly features in its own content, and this, for me, is a sufficient condition of its being represented by itself.

## 10

*P* seems relatively unproblematic—or so I hope. What about the mental reflexivity claim (ancient in both the Western and the Eastern traditions) that

[19] any episode of conscious awareness necessarily comports awareness of itself

even if—although—it does so only 'by the way', or 'in passing' or '*en marge*' (*ἐν παρεργῶ*, in Aristotle's expression, *nebenbei*, in Brentano's)?

[19] is at bottom just a variant of [1], or so I presume. That said, it's a common claim, and it may help to consider [1] in this impersonal form (it's impersonal inasmuch as contains no explicit reference to a subject).

The root idea behind both [1] and [19] can more feel difficult in its impersonal form than in its personal form (even when one accepts [19], one can find ways of stating it that may cause one to fall into doubt). There's a famous expression of it—so I take it to be—by Brentano. He considers a case of hearing a sound:

the consciousness of the presentation of the sound clearly occurs together with the consciousness of this consciousness, for the consciousness which accompanies the presentation of the sound is a consciousness not so much of this presentation as of the whole mental act in which the sound is presented, and in which the consciousness itself exists concomitantly. Apart from the fact that it presents the physical phenomenon of sound, the mental act of hearing becomes at the same time its own object and content, taken as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

The (impersonal) claim is that any episode of conscious awareness must comport awareness of itself in order to be the episode of conscious awareness that it is with the content that it has.

This can seem irredeemably paradoxical. It seems to say that the experiential content must somehow be already all there in order to be taken as an object of awareness in the way that is said to be necessary for it to be there in the first place. It seems this can't possibly be right. And yet it is (I believe) really just a way of saying that experience is *experience*, no less; that awareness is ... *awareness*. It seems that this is the best that discursive thought and language can do when it encounters the remarkable phenomenon of experience ('consciousness'). It's one expression of the fact that I don't dance dancing when I dance, but do experience experiencing when I experience.

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<sup>19</sup> It's related to itself in some way other than the way in which it is necessarily and trivially related to itself simply in being self-identical—if indeed you accept that self-identity is a relation.

<sup>20</sup> 1874:100. I assume that Brentano takes this to be Aristotle's view.

Let me rephrase this. Just as we considered a particular occurrent thought *P*, and assessed it in the light of [5]–[10], we may consider a particular occurrent episode of conscious awareness *a*, and make the same assessment. We take it that

[20] *a* (necessarily) comports awareness of itself

simply in being an episode of conscious awareness. Unlike *P*, *a* doesn't refer to itself, because it isn't a linguistic matter. It is nevertheless awareness *of* itself, hence *intentionally concerned* with itself ([10]). Does it therefore *(re)present* itself ([5] and [6])? One may well feel that it couldn't possibly be intentionally *of* itself unless it (re)presented itself—figured itself—in *some* manner, and I take there to be a robust sense of '(re)present' in which this is true. But I have some sympathy with the feeling that the intentionality is in this case too intimate to be said to involve (re)presentation.

What about *acquaintance* ([7])? Again the answer seems clear. The fact that *a* comports self-awareness, and indeed *constitutively* comports self-awareness, seems a clear case of immediate acquaintance, immediate self-acquaintance, even if—even though—its self-acquaintance is ἐν παρέργῳ or *nebenbei*. As for immediacy—it's not as if *a* somehow *travels out* from itself in some manner, in comporting awareness of itself, in order to take a look at itself in a way that might be thought to constitute something less than immediate acquaintance. And certainly there is no room for misrepresentation ([9]): not only because one can't in acquaintance be wrong about who one is, but also because one can't in acquaintance be wrong about how one is.

What about *relationality* ([8])? Acquaintance, like intentionality, seems essentially (trivially) relational. For whatever it is, it's a *having to do with something* on the part of something. This seems to be an irreducibly relational fact, even though the first something is the same thing as the thing the second something has to do with.

If *identity* is a relation, as nearly everyone allows (it's classified as a reflexive, symmetric, and transitive relation), then *a*'s comporting awareness of itself must surely also be. I think that one can, though, respectably wonder whether identity is a real relation. It seems to leave a lot to be desired, metaphysically, as a relation. It seems metaphysically epiphenomenal, as it were—empty—indeed non-existent. Perhaps we're misled by something that undoubtedly qualifies as a true proposition, a valid structure in discursive thought ( $A = A$ ), into thinking—wrongly—that it represents a real metaphysical something, a real relation, a real piece of *structure in reality*.

Let's accept for the moment that identity is not a real relation, a real metaphysical relation, and that one can't appeal to its being a relation in holding that *a*'s self-acquaintance is a genuine relation. My intuition is that *a* is still obviously relational, and self-relational, in comporting (Aristotelian, Brentanian) self-awareness in the way it does. Others may fail to find genuine metaphysical articulation or structure in *a*'s comporting self-awareness in the way it does, and be inclined to speak of irrelational self-awareness. What we have, they may say, is simply the unique self-luminous character of experience, immediate self-intimation of a sort that is not well thought of as involving relationality.

I can't resolve this disagreement, only report it. Its existence is perhaps valuably expressive of the *sui generis* nature of experience.

## 12

We move now, and finally, to the fully personal form of the reflexivity claim. We've accepted that all conscious experience essentially involves self-consciousness, self-awareness, and in particular pre-reflective self-awareness—that

[1] all conscious experience involves awareness on the part of the subject of itself.

Now we ask the following questions: Does the self or subject *s*, in being aware of itself in pre-reflective self-awareness, thereby and necessarily represent itself ([5] and [6])? Is it really right to say that *s*'s pre-reflective awareness of itself constitutes its having itself as intentional object ([10])? Does *s*'s pre-reflective self-awareness really amount to its standing in a genuine metaphysical relation to itself ([8])? (We've already put aside identity's claim to being a real metaphysical relation.) Is *s* really (immediately) acquainted with itself ([7])? Finally, is *s*, in being aware of itself in any way at all, whether pre-reflectively or hyper-reflectively, unable to be wrong about who it is ([9])?

Claims [5]–[8] and [10] are deeply intertwined. Claim [9] stands somewhat apart from them, and I'll deal with it first and briefly.<sup>21</sup> The first point is that it's obvious that one can't be wrong about who one is in pre-reflective self-awareness, because the only subject that one can possibly encounter in pre-reflective self-awareness is oneself. But what if one sees someone in a crowd in a mirror and wrongly thinks, of that person, that it is oneself ('that's me'), or sees oneself in the mirror and thinks, of oneself so seen, 'that's Fred', a thought that immediately entails 'that's not me'?

Cases like these have been made popular by Wittgenstein and others. Plainly they give one sense in which one can be wrong about who one is. But each one of them depends essentially for its possibility on the respect in which one is in having the thought right—not even possibly wrong—about who one is.

To see this it's enough to consider the 'me' in the thought 'that's me' or 'that's not me'. It can't possibly miss its mark, because it refers essentially to the thinker or haver of the very thought in question (it is as it were built into it). And it's precisely because it doesn't miss its mark (and can't—but we don't here need to appeal to this fact) that it's possible for one to be wrong about who one is in the rather recondite way discussed by Wittgenstein and others. For what one thinks is precisely that it is oneself *already correctly identified and referred to* who is someone one is not; or that someone who is not oneself is oneself *correctly identified and referred to*. If the inevitably correct identification were not in place, the mistake wouldn't be possible.

So much for [9]. What about [5] and [6]? Does *s*, in being aware of itself in pre-reflective self-awareness, really (*re*)present itself? As always, when I ask myself this, I first get an immediate 'Yes, obviously and trivially so': *s* (*re*)presents itself simply in having whatever experience it is having—imagine the simplest possible colour experience. There's no good philosophical reason to feel uncomfortable about this claim. It's no objection to say that the phenomenology is (say) just: redness.<sup>22</sup> So there's 'just' redness. Fine. The creature is only a sea-snail. Fine. The key claim—[1]—remains true and secure. *s* features in the content of its experience. It is in other words part of what is given to it in its experience. It is in having its experience related to itself, immediately acquainted with itself (the having is the knowing), intentionally related to itself ([7], [8], [10]). We human beings can be as astonishingly ignorant of ourselves as we evidently are, and as Freud, Kahneman, and others assure us we are, while knowing ourselves fully in this way.

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<sup>21</sup> I discuss it at length in Strawson 2012.

<sup>22</sup> I hope, but doubt, that the philosophical community will one day get over the idea that *Hume* claimed that one doesn't experience oneself in having experience; see Strawson 2011, or, more briefly, 2022.

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