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What is Self-Consciousness?

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One of the great debates in the history of philosophy is between those who see the conscious self as a monad (a single, indivisible entity) and those who see it as a unity of component parts. Regardless of one's opinion on the matter, in nearly all of these systems the conscious self is the primary principle of order in the individual, whether on a cosmic level, a scientific level, a level of logical necessity, or a personal, practical level. The conscious self is who we are, and if its unity is threatened, the individual stands at the brink of oblivion. Even in Buddhism, the realization of the self as a contingent unity does not imply an ability to survive in the world outside of a first person narrative. It would be an important advance in philosophy, then, if it could be shown that a sense of self is a contingent rather than a necessary feature of consciousness.

It may seem obvious to identify self-consciousness with a sense of self, but what does it mean to have a sense of one's self? We cannot say that having a sense of one's self is to apprehend one's self because the self is never a direct object of consciousness. We cannot locate a self in any field of sensory awareness, and yet it cannot be denied as a basic aspect of normal consciousness. I feel, in a definite and unquestionable way, that the person writing this essay is not Barrack Obama, not that man across the café with his bag slung across his shoulder, not my neighbor with the pianist's fingers, not my son, not any other person on earth except Brian Bruya. Brian is writing the essay; Brian is I, the self that is both subject and object of my conscious physical presence in the world. Intuitively, I should not be able to wonder whether the sense of self really has a necessary facticity with regard my actions in the world; I should not be able

to ask, what would happen if I had no sense of self? That there is a conscious self and that I am that self seems to be such a basic part of my consciousness that to lose a sense of self would mean a loss of unified action and consciousness. The implication of the necessity of a sense of self to consciousness implies that self-consciousness just is consciousness, that the two are one and the same, that we cannot have consciousness without self-consciousness.

Consciousness is self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is consciousness. We can turn this idea around and around, and from any angle, it seems irrefutable. For to lose consciousness of the self is to lose conscious guidance of one's actions, to become a zombie agent, a sleep-walker. How can I do anything in a normal state of consciousness without being aware that it is I who is doing that thing?

But a close interrogation of self-consciousness shows something else. We can, in fact, carry out actions ascribable to a self without direct awareness of the self carrying out such actions. We can act, and at high levels of competence, without a sense of self, without self-consciousness.

We may ask: what is self-consciousness? It is more than consciousness, and it is more than just the self. But what more? How do we adumbrate the elements of self-consciousness? In order to get a view of self-consciousness that is tractable to analysis, one must first understand it as a process rather than as a static state of being. In the following argument, I claim that self-consciousness is a process rather than a state and delineate the discrete steps of self-consciousness. Through descriptions of these steps and several examples, I highlight the distinct features of self-consciousness and show how it distinct from both consciousness and the self. After showing that self-consciousness can be absent from high-achievement activities, I consider the basic value of self-consciousness, concluding that as a contingent feature of consciousness it can be either beneficial or an impediment, depending on circumstances.

Let us consider the following seven steps as the basic, necessary elements of the process of self-consciousness:

1. Implicit awareness that the person and the self[1] are identical

1) I distinguish betwen 1) the *self* as a basic unity of thought and action (the person from the first-person point of view) and 2) the *conscious self* as an explicit but background awareness of that basic unity, which generally falls under our conscious control. This latter is what I refer to variously as the conscious self, as a sense of self, as self-awareness, or as self-consciousness.

2. Awareness of an event or circumstance in the world internal or external to the person
3. Awareness that this event or circumstance is not isolated, that something will result from it
4. Inference that a result of the circumstance or event may have an impact on one's person
5. Inference that the impact on one's person may have a normative valence with respect to one's person
6. Inference that the normative valence with respect to one's person may be significant to one's person
7. Implicit awareness that any event eventuating in a normative valence that is significant with respect to one's person will also be significant to one's self.

A lapse in any one of these seven steps precludes self-consciousness[2]. Let us consider each of them briefly in order and then in more detail with respect to several salient examples.

1. Implicit awareness that the person and the self are identical

One's awareness that the self and the person are identical is like one's awareness that one's toes are a part of one's body—it is not always present in consciousness, but it is always understood. Lacking this understanding, one cannot relate perceived events to the self. At this early stage, it is important to distinguish the self from a sense of the self. To say that one can be conscious without a sense of the self is not to say that one can be conscious without a self. Selfhood as the actual organizing principle of cognition and action can occur without an awareness of it.

2) There may be cases in which there is explicit awareness of the self absent a normative valence, but because such cases do not detract from the overall argument that both are distinct from consciousness and from the self, for the sake of this argument both self-consciousness and self-awareness will be considered as one and the same.

2. Awareness of an event or circumstance in the world internal or external to the person

Self-consciousness is not awareness of the self in isolation but of the self in its relationships with events in the world. Lacking such relationships or some awareness of them, self-consciousness does not arise.

3. Awareness that this event or circumstance is not isolated, that something will result from it

The relationships between the self and events in the world are constantly changing. When we perceive an event in the world, we may also extrapolate to its potential consequences for oneself. If we are aware of the event only in isolation, then self-consciousness does not arise.

4. Inference that the result may have an impact on one's person

Sometimes the consequences of an event for oneself are negligible. A leaf falls from a tree and brushes one's sleeve. In such a case, self-consciousness does not arise. Nevertheless, it is a precondition of self-consciousness that there must be an event and the event must have a perceived potential impact on the person.

5. Inference that the impact on one's person may have a normative valence with respect to one's person

Not only must there be an impact on one's person, that impact must have a normative valence--it must be perceived by the person on a spectrum of good to bad. Without an expectation or realization of normative valence, self-consciousness does not arise. A common case of self-consciousness involves performance before an audience. One can imagine a case in which one's performance leads a complete stranger to think ill of one. In this case, one can also imagine that such ill-feeling has no demonstrable affect on the person, and yet the person may perceive the very possibility of such ill feeling, let alone the actuality of it, to have a negative normative valence. Although there is no real potential impact of normative valence on the person, there is still the perception of such a possibility, which is sufficient.

6. Inference that the normative valence with respect to one's person may be significant to one's person

It is not sufficient that there be normative impact only, but the normative impact must also be perceived by the person as significant in some way to the person. Mere insignificant normative impact will not give rise to self-consciousness.

7. Implicit awareness that any event eventuating in a normative valence that is significant with respect to one's person will also be significant to one's self

Following from number 1, number 7 completes the circle of implied relationships, tying the event to the self and thereby allowing for self-consciousness to arise. Without this last step, the first-person narrative is not yet established; self-consciousness occurs only within that narrative.

Finally, one may not know whether an event will have an impact on one's person or what kind of impact it may have, the ignorance of which may result in anxiety. Anxiety over the outcome of steps 4, 5, and 6 can be substituted for each.

To reiterate, self-consciousness is neither mere consciousness nor the self. Rather, it is a multi-step process involving prospective evaluation of the normativity of events with respect to oneself. If any one step of this seven-step process is lacking, then self-consciousness does not occur. If one seeks to break the chain, it is vulnerable at several points. Let us examine the vulnerable links by looking at four salient examples of cognition and action.

A. Mind like a Mirror

In the Daoist and Zen traditions, there is an ideal state of a mind known as the mirror mind. It is said that in this state all considerations are set aside except for those directly related to the situation demanding a response, and thus one is able to respond to circumstances with a very high level of efficacy. When something occurs, one's mind registers that occurrence and prepares a response accordingly, *sans* any self-considerations or other considerations. A prominent metaphor that illustrates this state portrays a goose flying

over a lake in winter; the goose passes, and the lake leaves no trace. In the mirror mind, step four of the self-consciousness process described above is compromised—there is no perceived potential impact on the person, for the person is not perceived as metaphysically distinct from the rest of nature. Needless to say, this ideal state has not been well-attested.

B. Stoic and Daoist Naturalism

Related to the mirror mind is a worldview that explicitly accepts the individual as an integral part of the natural order. We see this in both the Daoism of Zhuangzi and in the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius. In this worldview, whatever happens to the individual that occurs outside of the individual's direct control is, at worst, normatively neutral, and at best it is normatively positive, for what happens naturally cannot be bad. Depending on one's viewpoint, one could say that this worldview compromises either step 5 or step 6 of the process of self-consciousness. If a belief precludes negative normativity, and only positive normativity is left, one could say that normative valence has been eliminated. From another perspective, if one knows that the normativity will be positive, then anxiety about the unknown has been eliminated.

C. Self-Invoking Trigger

Moving to the implicit level, a fascinating series of studies was done by kinesiologist Gabriele Wulf, in which she had subjects perform demanding physical tasks under distinct attentional conditions (Wulf 2007). One condition was for the subjects to focus their attention on some aspect of the task that was external to their person, such as a barbell or a target. In the other condition, subjects would perform exactly the same task but focusing attention on some aspect of the body, such as the fingertips or a particular muscle. During the tasks, Wulf took physiological measurements that can be construed *in toto* as the person's overall efficiency in performing the task. The question she was attempting to answer was: can one's focus of attention (external or internal) by itself affect the overall efficiency of human action? The answer turned out to be a surprising

yes—focusing on some aspect of the body reduced efficiency across all activities measured and across all levels of expertise. To explain this intriguing result, Wulf describes what she calls the «self-invoking trigger.» By bringing attention to one's body, one introduces into the perception-action cycle considerations of the self, the addition of which slows the cognitive response time and impedes the execution of the action. The theory of self-consciousness presented here explains why the invocation of the self can be detrimental to action—because it introduces several more steps into the cognitive cycle. Wulf's external focus condition obviates all of steps 3 – 7.

D. Flow

Related to Wulf's external focus condition is a state known in behavorial psychology as autotelicity, or flow. In this state, one is so absorbed in an activity that a sense of self entirely drops away from consciousness. Rather than a brief episodic state as in Wulf's experiments, this is a persistent episodic state that can last from minutes to hours, in which one loses a sense of time and feels retrospectively that the activity was conducting itself. There is the feeling that the personal narrative had been suspended during the course of the activity and that the activity persists under its own impetus, without a feeling of personal motivation. In this state, the suspension of self-consciousness is total, and yet one routinely performs at normal or superior levels of achievement (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura 2010).

Autotelicity brings together the previous three examples. In flow, subjects report that their responses to situations are unencumbered by all considerations outside of the immediate domain of activity, even by thoughts of winning in competitive sports. They achieve the legendary mirror mind. Further, two basic features of flow are 1) that one is engaged in an activity in which one has freely chosen to challenge oneself to excel and 2) that one is able to meet the challenges of the activity. Thus, when an immediate sense of self drops away during the activity, only the cues and responses within that domain of activity remain, and as one is able to meet the cues, normative judgments are suspended. The person feels «at one» with the activity, with no sharp

distinction between the self and the activity. Finally, one's attentional focus is on the cues of the activity rather than on any part of one's person, culminating in a total absence of self-consciousness.

In fact, autotelicity, or flow, is the ultimate test case for drawing distinctions among consciousness, the self, and self-consciousness. In flow, one is clearly conscious, perceiving, acting, remembering, predicting, and even performing at very high levels of achievement. There is no sense of an absence of normal consciousness, as with sleep, daydreaming, déjà vu, «spacing out», or «being on autopilot.» There is also an obvious self present in the unity of thought and action. What falls away in flow, however, is a salient sense of self and the normative judgments that accompany it—in other words, self-consciousness.

Flow is found across so many domains of activity and is so common in people's lives that it is difficult to call it an altered or abnormal state of consciousness. It is consistently favored by subjects who achieve it, and it is the state that subjects prefer over others and in which they find not only high achievement but great fulfillment (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). The simultaneity in flow of high achievement and absence of self-consciousness makes it easy to conclude that self-consciousness is, itself, an impediment to achievement. Such a conclusion would be premature.

Evaluation of Self-Consciousness

We can imagine a histologist examining her own skin cells under a microscope fully aware that they are hers and yet viewing them as external objects. This would not necessarily be an instance of self-consciousness. Similarly, a person can be watching a sports event, completely absorbed in the action of the game and pulling enthusiastically for the home team but absent any personal investment in the outcome. This person also would not necessarily be experiencing self-consciousness. Self-consciousness occurs when the scientist's cells may be cancer cells, or when a sports fan feels the pride of having won bragging rights or self-validation when his team wins.

Generally speaking, I think most of us experience self-consciousness in this sense on a regular basis through a day, especially

when among others or imaginatively viewing ourselves vis-à-vis others. We are generally very often aware of our place in the scheme of things and how our actions and other actions and events can affect us. Autotelic experience is unique in that self-consciousness blinks out even while the rest of conscious awareness achieves extremely high levels of competence. So if achievement and self-consciousness are inversely related in this way, then why do we have self-consciousness at all?

An approximate answer is easy enough to come by. Flow occurs in well-demarcated domains of activity in which one can achieve high levels safely without normative valuations with respect to oneself. Much of day-to-day life, however, is not so well-demarcated. We have to monitor the subtle reactions of others, putting ourselves in their shoes to ask how we are doing. We often don't know how others will judge us until the judgments have come, and even then, the accuracy of such judgments is open to question. We live in a world of uncertain normativity that is constantly changing. One can try to adopt a Stoic or Daoist standpoint, focusing on what is within our control and assuming that everything else is as it should be, but the judgments keep coming, and if we do not adjust ourselves to minimal standards of society, we risk the discomfiture of alienation. In other words, self-consciousness acts as our social compass in the uncertain domain of interpersonal relations. In the domains in which flow is most common, the syntax of interpersonal relations is straightforward and predictable, and so self-consciousness can be safely shutdown. In a tennis or chess match, there is a ritualized greeting; in close conversation with a friend, trust and familiarity obviate the need for continuous self-monitoring; and many flow activities, such as painting, writing, wood-carving, etc., are individual activities absent interpersonal relations, again obviating the need for constant personal monitoring vis-à-vis others.[3]

A more precise answer to the question of why we have self-consciousness can be built up from our approximate answer. One

3) Psychologists distinguish between public and private self-consciousness. In the cases of private pursuits, one may still experience private self-consciousness, for instance, with respect to the prospects for future achievement, but that occurs on an individual basis and so is not relevant as a general principle.

of the key features of flow activities is that they involve habituated actions and/or habituated syntax. It is generally difficult to find flow in an activity in which one is a complete novice because one has not yet become accustomed to how to meet cues appropriately (for a further analysis of action syntax, see Bruya 2010). We saw above in the Wulf studies that turning one's attention on oneself, even in the most innocent way, can have a negative impact on the efficiency of action. Similar results have been found in related studies. For instance, Roy Baumeister found that, «situational demands for excellent performance (i.e., pressure) cause the individual to attend consciously to his or her internal process of performance, and this consciousness disrupts that process and harms the performance» (Baumeister 1984, p. 618). At first glance, this makes it seem as if self-consciousness is always bad, but Baumeister notes that his model is «based on the execution of automatically learned response sequences» (Baumeister 1984, 619); in other words, it involves habituated action. Sian Beilock and Thomas Carr have refined Baumeister's work by including activities that do not involve habituated action (Beilock and Carr 2001, 701-725).

Their results reflect Baumeister's with regard to habituated actions, but for actions that had not yet been habituated, they found that conditions designed to increase self-consciousness tended to improve performance in novices with little practice. Self-consciousness, then, seems to have its place in activities that profit from the monitoring of one's actions. In Beilock and Carr's experiments, as soon as subjects gained a level of automaticity, conditions designed to increase self-consciousness showed a detrimental effect on performance.

In conclusion, the argument above lays out seven discrete steps in the process of self-consciousness. Through explanations of the discrete steps and salient examples, it is shown that self-consciousness is distinct from both consciousness and the self. Further, it is shown that action at very high levels can be achieved absent self-consciousness. Finally, the value of self-consciousness was considered and found to lie in activities (such as interpersonal relations) in which the close monitoring of one's actions can facilitate the accomplishment of one's goals. In habituated actions, such monitoring has a deleterious effect,

which explains why self-consciousness drops away during autotelic activities.

We find, finally, that consciousness is not self-consciousness, and while there are endless debates about what consciousness is and what the boundaries of the self are, it is now clear that self-consciousness is a distinct species. The idea that one can act competently absent a sense of the self or that one can «become one with» an activity is often relegated to the realm of mysticism, resulting in a *de facto* absence from some self-described «serious» philosophical discussions. Regardless of its mystical status, the phenomenon of action absent a sense of the self is well-testified in mainstream scientific literature and demonstrates conclusively that one can be conscious in a normal way without self-consciousness and with the self fully intact.

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