

**Phil 490: *Consciousness and the Self*
Handout [2]**

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*** Problems of self-consciousness**

1. the metaphysical problem of self-consciousness: how we explain what self-consciousness is and what self is
2. the epistemological problem of self-consciousness: what different types of knowledge obtained through self-consciousness → self-knowledge
3. the problem of the functional role of self-consciousness: the role that self-consciousness plays within our cognitive system

What self-consciousness brings:

1. Only self-conscious creatures are able to reflect upon their own mental lives or develop strategies for the future.
2. Self-consciousness is required for basic forms of action — one cannot act upon the world without information about one's own location and the disposition of our limbs.

Discussion Questions:

- (1) Are humans the only animals that have self-consciousness?
- (2) At what age do young children develop self-consciousness? What is required for such a development?

I. The Metaphysics of the Self

___ Is there such a thing as a self? If so, what sort of a thing is the self?

(a) reductionism

There is no separate thing as the self. What we think of as the self should be analyzed as (or reducible to) a complex set or “bundle” of suitably interrelated events.

(b) substance dualism

The self is a purely psychological entity that is connected to a particular body but that could exist without the body.

(c) embodied human animal — bodily continuity or psychological continuity?

Three possible views:

- (i) bodily continuity
- (ii) psychological continuity (e.g. Locke's prince and the cobbler)
- (iii) both bodily continuity and psychological continuity

II. The Knowledge of the Self

* Two Forms of Self-Awareness:

[direct awareness]: the object of awareness is a particular thing. (e.g. being aware of myself)

[propositional awareness]: the direct object of awareness is a proposition or a state of affairs (a complex of particular things, properties and/or relations) (e.g. being aware of my being the only woman in this group, etc.)

* Hume's *elusiveness thesis*:

___ The self can never be the object of direct awareness; the self can never be encountered in introspection.

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. — Hume, p. 252

Discussion: How do we understand this thesis? What do you perceive when you introspect?

Propositional awareness of the self is not threatened by the above challenge.

* the Special Features of Self-knowledge

- 1) **privileged access:** One's knowledge of one's own mind is different from one's knowledge of the world.
- 2) **immunity to error through misidentification:** Judgments made on the basis of self-knowledge cannot be mistaken about *who it is* who has the property in question.

III. The Functional Role of Self-consciousness

- 1) Self-conscious subjects think about, and react to, the world in distinctive and characteristic ways that are not available to non self-conscious subjects.
- 2) Self-consciousness makes possible certain types of inference and reflection.
- 3) Self-conscious thoughts have immediate implications for action.
- 4) Self-conscious thoughts are naturally expressed with sentences involving the first-person pronouns.

Discussion:

— Is self-consciousness dependent on the usage of language — the self-referential term 'I'?

*** The Interdependent Thesis:**

A creature's capacity for self-consciousness is directly proportional to its capacity to represent the world in the following ways:

- (i) Self-consciousness both depends upon and makes possible the perception of a spatio-temporal world composed of continuously existing objects causally interacting in lawlike ways. (Kant)
- (ii) The capacity to have self-consciousness requires a mastery of the first-person concept, which further depends on the ability to conceive of oneself from the third-person point of view. (Evans)
- (iii) The capacity for self-consciousness requires the ability to ascribe experiences to oneself as a continuously existing particular located within an objective world. (Strawson)