



The Self and Self-Awareness

Thomas W. Smythe*

North Carolina Central University, Durham, NC, USA

Email: thomaswsmythe@yahoo.com

Received 24 June 2016; accepted 23 July 2016; published 29 July 2016

Copyright © 2016 by author and OALib.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

In the history of philosophical discussions of the self it has been assumed that self-awareness is a reliable source of knowledge about the nature of a person. This paper reprises and compares the views of Immanuel Kant, and how Gilbert Ryle supplies a partial solution to problems Kant raises. The paper ends with a presentation of my own view of the difficulties these authors address about our self-awareness and the self or subject of experiences.

Keywords

Self, Self-Awareness, Nonsensory Perception, Body

Subject Areas: Philosophy

1. Introduction

In philosophical discussions of the self or the pure ego it tends to be assumed that the knowledge we have of ourselves is more important in finding out about the nature of a person than the knowledge we have of others. This is especially true of those cases where “I” is used as the grammatical subject of psychological predicates. The idea that self-knowledge and the relative certainty we have of our own psychological states is more important in discovering the nature of a person than our knowledge of others and their minds has given rise to the demand that the subject of consciousness be an object of self-consciousness. The difficulties this demand raises for a Cartesian view of the subject of experiences as a potentially disembodied, immaterial, mental substance are well known. As David Hume pointed out, we are no more aware of such a mental substance than we are aware of material substances of Cartesian metaphysics. But Hume still believed we are aware of ourselves. Of the subject of experiences, as an object, and this led him to define the “self” as a “bundle of perceptions” [1].

2. Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant did not settle for this because he believed it amounts to denying that the self or “subject” is what

*Retired associate professor of philosophy.

has perceptions and conscious experiences, and because he thought that as a subject of experiences, the self, or person, is also a precondition for any experience, including experiences of oneself. Beginning that there is a crucial sense in which we have self-awareness Kant thought he had to say we are aware of ourselves as a subject of experiences, and not just as our inner mental goings on, but he limited this self-awareness of the “subject” to an awareness of a thinking activity of unifying and combining what is given in sensation. This unifying activity is not nothing. It is a transcendental requirement for awareness of myself as having a personal history as well as a necessary condition for my awareness of a single, unified external world as distinct from myself. This transcendental unifying activity, which Kant said could not be known as a mental substance by introspection, is nonetheless discerned in self-awareness (we are aware that it exists in us) and is a part of oneself—a transcendental self or ego. But we are not aware of this activity of combination as itself having any properties; in itself it must remain a mystery to us. It is a noumenal or transcendent object of self, this nothing we could ever be aware of, or know.

Having committed himself to these features of the self and self-awareness Kant began to raise some difficulties. The problem he formed can be put like this: How can there be one and the same self, if we distinguish the I which thinks (apperception) from the I which is intuited (inner sense)? If I am a thinking subject or substance, how can I know myself in intuition (as object)? And how can such knowledge be knowledge of myself, if it is only knowledge of only as I appear to myself in intuition, and not as I am in myself? Kant was aware that he could not answer these questions happily. He believed that we are one self or “subject” that appears in two ways: as a spontaneous, knowing subject, and as a receptive, known object. Consider the statement “I am aware of a pain”. For Kant the truth of this statement involves an awareness of a state of myself (pain) and an awareness that it is my (awareness of) pain (self-awareness), thus an awareness of my self as a subject that has the pain.

The I or subject is not an object, only the pain is. The self, or subject, is a transcendental precondition for the awareness of the pain. The self, or subject, is a transcendental precondition for the awareness of pain, and Kant says the self-awareness that I am (a transcendental ego) is in itself a completely empty representation of which we cannot even have a concept. He says we can only “revolve in a perpetual circle” around ourselves as we actually are [2]. This is revealed in the following passages:

I cannot know as an object that which I must presuppose to know any object... [3]. The subject of the categories cannot by thinking the categories acquire a concept of itself as an object of the categories. For in order to think them, its pure self-consciousness, which is what is to be explained, must itself be presupposed. Similarly, the subject, in which the representation of time has its original ground, cannot thereby determine its own existence in time.

And if this latter is impossible, the former, as a determination of the self (as a thinking being in general) by means of the categories, is equally so [4].

This all seems to be quite puzzling, I think, after we have made a few assumptions.

We assume the nature of a person known most intimately through introspection. Further, from the truism that first-person psychological statements like “I am aware of a pain” are to be analyzed as a relation between subject and object of experiences, we further assume that besides awareness of pain we, at the same time, have an awareness that is inner-directed, of the subject as an object. Here is where difficulties start to arise because even if I am aware of “my awareness of pain”, the subject of this awareness is still not itself an object of awareness. The fact that I am aware of my awareness of pain does not mean I am aware of the I that is aware of my being in pain. Realizing this, Kant identified the presupposed subject as a transcendental precondition and said that we can never be aware of any of its properties, we can only be aware of it as a further object of awareness. This led him to say that there is an aspect of ourselves (a noumenal self) that we can never be aware of at all. It does seem that I am always aware of what I just did or thought and can never catch myself as an object of awareness.

3. Gilbert Ryle

Gilbert Ryle has given what, to my mind, is a partially satisfactory dissolution of this muddle in his discussion of the “Systematic elusiveness of the ‘I’”. By bringing out the nature of higher-order actions, he claims to be throwing light on the nature of self-consciousness. He explains higher-order actions by saying “some sort of actions are in one way or another concerned with, or operations upon, other actions”. We can only direct a cross-examination of evidence that has already been presented, or play a role as a customer only in relation to a seller.

After learning to perform higher-order actions in interpersonal transactions, a person can internalize the

process and direct higher order acts upon his own lower order acts. Any action that gets brought off can be the object of another action of my own or of someone else. Presumably, self-awareness is always a higher-order awareness by being an awareness of some action, attribute, of previous awareness of one's own. To bring out the comparison Ryle shows how the word "I" is systematically elusive. With any of our operations, there arises the possibility of a higher order operation upon it, and this can go on indefinitely. Ryle says, "self-commentary, self-ridicule, and self-admonition are condemned to eternal penultimacy" [5]. An awareness of pain cannot be an awareness of itself.

Let us try to apply this to Kant's worries about the inability we have of ever being aware of the real (transcendental) self. Ryle seems to be drawing an analogy between activities directed towards objects, and further activities directed upon the original activity and talk of awareness and self-awareness. But just where does the analogy lie? Is awareness an activity and self-awareness a higher order activity directed on it? If not, in what important ways are self-commentaries and self-awareness alike? Ryle says too little about self-consciousness to be helpful here, but I think a couple of points can be gotten out of the comparison he invites us to make.

The first point is that there is a logical asymmetry in self-commentaries which can be thought of as attaching to self-consciousness. It can be claimed that there is no awareness of a self or subject when we are aware of a mental state because the awareness one has of a pain has pain as its object rather than the subject. I could be aware of my awareness of pain, but this would require a further distinct awareness (an awareness of an awareness of pain). I can also be aware that I am aware of pain, but this reflective act of self-awareness will be at different act than "my awareness of pain". Thus I can have an

awareness of pain
awareness that I am in pain
awareness of my awareness of pain

But there need be no need to think that I am aware of a subject of mental states in any of these performances. But these all seem to be different phenomena. What I think may be Ryle's insightful point is that a statement like "I am aware of a pain" can be analyzed as a relation between the subject and object, but the mental event here, the awareness of pain, has pain as its object, not the I, or some referent of "I". An "I" sentence, Ryle says, indicates who it is about by being used as opposed to "you" and "he" sentences (Ryle, 1949). There is no reason to think, therefore, that there must be a metaphysical or transcendental subject or self, corresponding to the subject referred to in "I" sentences which we can discern (or presuppose) in an act of introspection, because there is no reason to suppose we have missed anything.

We should not conclude, however, and this seems to be Ryle's second point, that there is something about the self or subject of awareness that remains ineluctably hidden from us; that oneself is unknowable to oneself. For any given action, such as telling a joke, that action can become the object of some higher-order action. But there is nothing about the action that must escape us. For any action there is always some other activity that can be directed upon it. Self-awareness is analogous to higher-order actions in this respect. Given my awareness of pain, I can always become aware that it is me who is in pain. There is no awareness of an object that must remain inaccessible to us, and one can always be aware that he, the subject of awareness, is what is aware of something by directing a further act of awareness on oneself.

However, partly because he was given to caricature, and partly because he only makes passing allusions to self-consciousness, I do not think Ryle has succeeded in treating all of the difficulties in discussions of self-awareness. For one thing, Ryle seems to be denying what seems obviously true to many philosophers, namely, that a person can be aware of themselves as a subject of experiences. It is important to specify how one can be aware of themselves as a subject of mental states without getting into the difficulties Kant refers to as the "perpetual circle" while recognizing what Ryle calls the "systematic elusiveness of the self". Second, he does not succeed in explaining why self-awareness is not of crucial importance for finding out about the nature of a person (as a subject of experiences).

I think we can bring out what is missing in Ryle's discussion, and what it is that bothered philosophers like Hume and Kant by looking at some features of the legacy of Rene Descartes. Given that we can know first-person psychological statements like "I am thinking about where to take a vacation" or "I have a headache". apart from knowing anything about our own bodies, and that such knowledge is not grounded on any observation, the question can arise of how we know such statements. For the statement "I have a headache", refers to a certain headache, and to the person whose headache it is (myself). So it seems that for me to know that I have a

headache, I must be aware of my headache and be aware of myself. But I am surely not aware of myself in this case by being aware of my body, since I can know I have a headache without inspecting my body. It might seem that I am aware of myself, that thing which has the headache, in some way. What has bothered philosophers such as Hume and Kant is that we do not seem to be aware of anything corresponding to the referent of “I” except our headaches, our thoughts, desires, beliefs, images, and so forth. This led the inheritors of Hume’s epistemology to say that the self just is the mental states we experience. Compounding this is the fact that one’s knowledge that they have a headache is more secure and accessible than our knowledge that someone else has a headache. Add to this the fact that I am a subject that has a headache yet I do not seem to perceive this subject or self with any of my five sense modalities, or by inner sense or introspection. I just feel the headache. Do I have any awareness of the self or subject that has the headache? I will maintain that Kant himself foreshadowed a solution to this problem that I have provided elsewhere. Then I will state my view.

4. A Proposed Solution

Kant is usually thought to distinguish between the empirical self, which is known to the subject through an inner sense, and a noumenal self, which is inaccessible to the subject and unknowable.

Knowledge is limited to what we can access by sense experience. Kant did not think we could know the self as a substance or thing, but only our mental states strung out in time. However, he sometimes strayed from this position. Consider the following Man, who knows all the rest of nature solely through his senses, knows himself through pure apperception; and this, indeed, in acts of inner determinations which he cannot regard as impressions of the senses. He is thus to himself, on the one hand phenomenon, and on the other respect of certain faculties of the action which cannot be ascribed to a receptivity of sensibility, a purely intelligible object [6].

This clearly suggests that in pure apperception we have a supersensible, transcendental awareness of the I. In another place, Kant says “I exist as an intelligence which is conscious solely of its power of combination” [7]. This can be translated as “I exist as an entity that knows about itself by its performance of an activity of combination”. By suggesting that we might have a nonsensuous awareness of the transcendental self as a precondition for knowledge of the empirical self, Kant foreshadows, and makes room for, a solution to his problem in terms of a nonsensory intuitive perception of the self [8]. Let us explain what this means in a more recent view that I have developed in other writings.

In my view I believe that a case can be made that we enjoy a nonsensory intuitive perception of the self. Consider the statement that “I have a headache” again. My headache is something that I am aware of as the object of my perception. I perceive I have a headache although the nature of the perception is quite controversial. By an act of self-reflection (what Ryle calls a higher-order action) I can achieve a nonsensory intuitive background perception of myself as something or other that is having the headache. I am something, a substance or thing, that is aware of something else—a headache. My self-awareness is “nonsensory” because it does not deploy any of the usual five sense modalities such as hearing, seeing, tasting smelling or touching. Now some people would question this because they believe that we can only perceive things in some visible, auditory, or other sensible form, and when we deny this they become skeptical. This assumes that the familiar facts of sense perception set a priori limits on what is possible by way of direct experience by perceiving subjects. But I see no reason to suppose there are such limits. We can conceive of the possibility of self-awareness of themselves or the subject of experiences where this is not based on the operation of any physical, organic sense modality at all. There is no a priori reason to think that a nonsensory experience of a thinking subject or self is impossible or unintelligible.

My self-awareness of myself or subject is a nonsensory “perception” because when I am self-aware something prompts me, stimulates me, or is given to me. I do not create the object. It is not like an insight. There are two kinds of perception. One is sense perception. The other is when something is given to you without utilizing the five senses. This raises the question about what the nature of the given is. This question assumes that the given must have some definite content such as a perceived quality or property. But again I see no reason to suppose every kind of perception must be of a quality or property if it is to be a genuine perception. We can say that there is something that it is like to have such a nonsensory perception.

Consider some examples of a nonsensory perception that is similar to an intuition. Intuition is generally considered a source of knowledge even though it is not as generally reliable as sense perception or reasoning. We do generally think we can know some things by intuition. An example is when you see an old person crossing a

busy street, and it strikes you that you should help them cross the street. Such examples are quite common and can be multiplied indefinitely. Our intuitions are often correct. We rely on them in our mundane lives. I see no reason why we do not in fact have nonsensory perceptual intuitions of the self or subject of mental states. It seems that we do often have access to the self or subject of experiences through a nonsensory intuitive perception. However, there are still problems.

Affirming that we can have a nonsensory intuitive perception of the self does not solve any of the traditional metaphysical problems of the self. It does not solve the problem of the metaphysical nature of a person. In particular, it does not tell us whether the self is physical or nonphysical in nature.

Whether the metaphysical self is physical or nonphysical in nature is partly what Kant called the noumenal aspect of the self. We do not know by virtue of our experience of the self whether the self is physical or nonphysical. That is why the notion of the self in philosophy is partly a metaphysical one.

This metaphysical problem was highlighted by Kant who distinguished between what we perceive, the appearances, or what is directly presented to us, and the external world, that we do not perceive. The external world is forever inaccessible to us because of a perceptual curtain, or veil of perception.

The same problem arises for self-awareness. I can be aware, by inner reflective consciousness, of a self as I appear to myself, but I am debarred from ever getting at my real self by a veil of inner perception.

I am unable to solve these metaphysical problems that continue to bother philosophers. Instead, I have given an account of a way we have a sense of self via a nonsensory intuitive perception. I do not perceive the self as being physical or nonphysical by having a nonsensory intuitive perception of the self or subject. We can ask what makes a property a “physical” property? One answer is that a property is physical if it is used as explanations of the data of the organic or inorganic natural sciences.

5. Conclusion

The paper has pointed out some difficulties Kant raised for the self and self-awareness. Ryle set out to solve these difficulties, and had some success. Kant foreshadowed a view that I have taken and outline here that says we can have a nonsensory perception of one self. Some objections to this view are considered. The view defended here provides a way that we can know the self or subject.

References

- [1] Hume, D. (1888) *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Selby-Bigge, London.
- [2] Kant, I. (1933) *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Kemp-Smith, N., Trans., Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, B404.
- [3] Kant, I. (1933) *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Kemp-Smith, N., Trans., Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, A402.
- [4] Kant, I. (1933) *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Kemp-Smith, N., Trans., Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, B422.
- [5] Ryle, G. (1949) *The Concept of Mind*. Barnes and Noble, New York.
- [6] Kant, I. (1933) *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Kemp-Smith, N., Trans., Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, A546, B547.
- [7] Kant, I. (1933) *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Kemp-Smith, N., Trans., Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, B148.
- [8] Smythe, T.W. (2013) Kant on Self-Awareness. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, **3**, 531-535.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2013.34077>



Submit or recommend next manuscript to OALib Journal and we will provide best service for you:

- Publication frequency: Monthly
- 9 [subject areas](#) of science, technology and medicine
- Fair and rigorous peer-review system
- Fast publication process
- Article promotion in various social networking sites (LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Maximum dissemination of your research work

Submit Your Paper Online: [Click Here to Submit](#)

Contact Us: service@oalib.com