Self-consciousness, non-conceptual content and intersubjectivity

1. Claims

1. The intuition that self-consciousness is based on a pre-reflexive familiarity with oneself needs to be spelled out and explained. Recent work on non-conceptual self-content provides a promising strategy for doing so.

2. Nevertheless, pre-reflexive (or non-conceptual) self-consciousness fails to fulfill the criteria for genuine self-consciousness and is therefore insufficient for a complete account of self-consciousness.

3. Self-consciousness is constitutively linked to an awareness of other minds ("symmetry thesis"). Thus, we will not fully understand self-consciousness without understanding intersubjectivity. This is largely ignored by many contemporary theories of self-consciousness.

2. Self-consciousness and attitudes de se

Self-consciousness can be defined as the ability to become conscious of one’s own states as one’s own states. This ability is manifested when a creature refers to itself as itself, i.e. when it has a thought that, in the case of linguistic beings, would be expressed by means of the first person pronoun. An important feature of the first-person pronoun is that it cannot be reduced to co-referential descriptive terms. The first person pronoun seems to be an "essential indexical" (Perry, 1979, 1979).

In other words: attitudes de se cannot be reduced to attitudes de re (or de dicto).

3. Pre-reflexive familiarity and non-conceptual content

Some authors (e.g. authors of the so-called "Heidelberg School") conclude that attitudes de se are based on a non-conceptual, un-mediated, pre-reflexive familiarity with oneself (cf. e.g. Frank, 2002).

But just how is this pre-reflexive familiarity with oneself to be explained? Recent philosophical and empirical research on non-conceptual self-consciousness has made important strides in this regard. Candidates for non-conceptual self-consciousness include proprioception, agency, and self-specifying information that is implicit in perception. (cf. Bortolotti, 1998, Hussey, 1997)

These forms of non-conceptual content might be able to account for the subjectivity of consciousness experiences (I.e. "mineness", "selfhood", and "perspectivalness"; cf. e.g. Metzinger, 2003). The resulting so-called pre-reflexive self-consciousness, in turn, is supposed to ground other, conceptual, forms of self-consciousness (e.g. Legrand, 2003).

However, while pre-reflexive self-consciousness provides the subject with information that is in fact about itself, this information is not explicitly represented as being about the subject. It therefore fails to fulfill the criteria for genuine self-consciousness, understood as the ability of being aware of one’s states as one’s own.

In other words: having a first-person perspective is as much being self-conscious.

Thus, two important questions remain open: 1. How does the self, being implicit in conscious experience, become an explicit part of our representations? How do we gain information that is not only in fact about ourselves, but is also represented as being about ourselves?

2. If pre-reflexive self-consciousness is a constant structural element of all consciousness experience (cf. Legrand, 2003), how are we to explain the fact that some beings develop an explicit (genuine) self-consciousness of themselves while others don’t?

4. The missing link - intersubjectivity

The symmetry thesis:
Self-consciousness, understood as consciousness of oneself as oneself, is essentially a non-conscious one.

Without the awareness that mental states can be had by others, there would simply be no need for an explicit representation of my mental states as my own. Any explicit self-reference would be completely redundant. Hence, an awareness of my own states as my own is constitutively linked to an awareness of the states of others. In other words: self-consciousness arises only in the context of intersubjectivity.

5. Some empirical data

1. Human beings are inherently social:
- Infants display imitation behavior shortly after birth. (McTavish and Moore, 1993).
- At about 6 months of age they begin to display "triadic interactions" (e.g. Tomasello, 2005).

2. Explicit self-consciousness is correlated with the development of a theory of mind:
- Mirror self-recognition is correlated with the development of a theory of mind (Gallup, Anderson, Snowdon, 2006).
- Autistic children, who seem to have deficits inferring the mental states of others (Baron-Cohen, 2001), show a delay in the development of self-recognition, and some never display signs of mirror self-recognition (Spitzer & Ricks, 1984).
- "Peers that don’t seem to be able to develop a theory of mind also fail to show self-recognition (Cherry & Kellward, 1999)." Imaging studies suggest that the right frontal cortex is involved in self-related processing as well as in representing the mental states of others. (Platkin et al., 2004, Krean et al., 2003, Stuss et al., 2001, Happe et al., 1999).

6. Conclusion

1. Having a first-person perspective is not to be confused with being self-conscious.
2. In order to fully understand genuine self-consciousness, we have to take into account that it arises only in the context of intersubjectivity.

3. An understanding of self-consciousness will require the integration of insights from different disciplines.

7. (Some) open questions

- What representational capacities are required for explicit self-representations?
- Is being aware of oneself as oneself necessarily a conceptual capacity?
- What role does intersubjectivity play?
- What are the developmental steps from pre-reflexive familiarity to full-blown, conceptual self-consciousness?
- What is the exact relationship between ToM and self-consciousness?
- What neural networks are involved?
- What can we learn from pathological conditions, such as schizophrenia, autism, etc.?