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Types of Self-Awareness in Medieval Thought

What am I? There are many ways of addressing this question. The approach I take in this paper is to look closer at one's being aware of oneself—at self-awareness, that is. I will ask two main questions: What are the types of things that I can be aware of as being me? And what kind of thing is the “I” that is aware of oneself in different types of self-awareness? That is, I will try to give a picture of the different kinds of things that can occur either as objects or as subjects in the peculiar relation of being self-aware.

I will address the problem in relation to medieval texts. This is not because the aims of the paper would be exhausted in historical curiosity. Rather, I think that a closer look at the medieval material can illuminate the relevant philosophical issues as we face them now. Thus, my main aims lie in a strive towards a critical understanding of our own contemporary habits of thought concerning selfhood.

With self-awareness I mean here a cognitive relation\(^1\) between a subject and an object such that the object appears to the subject as being the subject itself or at least a part of the subject. In a most ordinary sense, when I am aware of the strength of my arms at the moment of successfully lifting 200 pounds at the gym, I have self-awareness of my own arms. I feel them as my own arms. In this situation, I am a thinking subject who has a relation to a physical object such that the subject cognizes the object as a part of the subject himself.

Thus, I am not primarily discussing awareness of one's own thoughts. Rather, self-awareness of thought is just one special type of awareness that I will consider. I will proceed with the help of a four-fold distinction regarding the object of self-awareness, distinguishing the bodily self, the living sensitive and emotional self, the intellectual self, and the social self. The idea is that as a human being I can consider myself in these four ways. I am a physical object with a specific height, weight, temperature, and many other such properties. Also, I am a living animal that acts emotionally upon information perceived by the senses, not always thinking about what I am doing in any conceptual sense. Further, I am an intellectual entity capable of conceptual rational thinking and voluntary choices. Finally, I aim at my own best, and for this pursuit I

\(^1\) In the scope of this paper I cannot go into what counts as a “cognitive relation.” I am taking the term in the medieval way so that all sensory perceptions count as cognitive regardless of how simple the sensory system of the subject is. Thus, cognitive relations need not have a conceptual nature, but they do convey information.
need a view of what I am—and as I will show this may mean counting other people as parts of the whole whose best I strive for.

This fourfold division serves as the plot of the paper insofar as it concerns the objects of self-awareness. Consideration of the subjects will join the picture in a respective order. But before going into the discussion proper, two things need to be recognized. First, I am taking for granted that there is a self. This assumption, however, is not a very loaded one. Rather, I am simply following the medieval understanding. That I have a self means little more than that I exist. And as the medieval authors usually thought, this only means that I exist as a worldly human. This does not imply existing as a single subject of thought with an inner world—or anything else of such a mysterious nature.

Second, there is a specific contemporary philosophical problem that I am addressing. In the recent decades, it has been widely recognized that the human mind is not an entity independent of the body. A lively philosophical discussion has ensued. As it seems to me, a crucial misunderstanding has nevertheless disturbed the discussion. It has mainly proceeded with the help of the term ‘embodiment’ and often concerns the self-awareness that includes having a body—rather than awareness of oneself as being a corporeal object.

Literally, the term ‘embodiment’ means that there first is a mind, which then gets a body. Even though practically no one really believes that this is the temporal or even logical order in which humans come into the world, much of the philosophical discussion assumes that we should seek for ways of understanding how thought is “embodied.” Medieval thinkers thought in the other direction. They spoke of ensoulment: the idea is that there is primarily a body that also has a soul. Thus, we ought not look at our relation to our body mediately through our relation to our mind. Rather, we are bodies first and foremost.

Furthermore, I will try to point towards a philosophical understanding of self-interested cognition that has at its core a bodily nature. As bodies, we cognize ourselves sufficiently well in order to take basic care of ourselves even without thinking much about the practicalities. To live, we do not necessarily need intellectual understanding and perhaps not even thought. That we are thinking things capable of understanding our life more deeply is only a superstructure added upon the basic level of living an autonomous life. While early modern authors like René Descartes may still have understood and respected this fact, it seems to be all too often forgotten in the contemporary discussions in philosophy of mind and even in phenomenology. Here I follow the medieval authors in taking seriously the fact that we are bodies first. We get minds only when the body is mature enough.