THE UBIQUITY OF SELF-AWARENESS

Tomis KAPITAN
Northern Illinois University, DeKalb

Introduction

Two claims have been prominent in recent discussions of self-consciousness. One is that first-person reference or first-person thinking is irreducible (the Irreducibility Thesis), and the other is that an awareness of self accompanies all conscious states, at least those through which one refers to something. The latter – here termed the Ubiquity Thesis – has long been associated with philosophers like Fichte, Brentano, and Sartre, though each articulated his own version of the claim. More recently, variants have been defended by Dieter Henrich (1970) and Manfred Frank (1991, 1995a, 1995b). In Frank’s words:

... every mediated reference to something different from consciousness is mediated by immediate self-awareness. This mediation may be called “transcendental” in a weak sense of the term, according to which what is transcendental does not pertain to the objects of which we speak or think but to the preconditions of such speaking or thinking-presuppositions that fundamentally include a subject immediately certain of its self. (Frank 1995b, 49-50)

Like Henrich, Frank finds immediate self-awareness (mental familiarity, Vertrautheit) to be “non-conceptual” in that it requires no mediation of concepts and no identification or classification of an object of thought in terms of a distinguishing set of characteristics (Frank 1995b, 34-35). It is a direct acquaintance with one’s own mental acts or subjectivity which, properly speaking, is not an act of reference at all but a “pre-reflective” and “pre-linguistic” state of consciousness (compare Sartre 1957, 41). To establish its ubiquity, Frank appeals to a Dependency Thesis: immediate self-awareness is
an original type of consciousness that is presupposed by reference to any sort of object, including indexical references by means of "this", "here", "now", and object uses of "I" (Frank 1995b, 49). He argues for this claim, in turn, by recourse to the characteristics of indexical thinking.

A question arises. That we can be, and often are, immediately aware of our own mental states is clear enough, but why suppose that such awareness is ubiquitous? Are we not sometimes aware of things without being aware of ourselves or our own awareness? If I am engrossed in watching leaves being tossed about in the autumn wind, concentrating upon the opening bars of the Hammerklavier Sonata, or figuring my annual business deductions, am I, by that very fact, aware of myself, my own experiencing, my subjectivity? These experiences are obviously mine and consciousness is constitutive of them, but must they be accompanied by an underlying reflexive state?

Frank 1995b develops an intriguing attempt to answer these questions in the affirmative. But while it wisely bases Ubiquity upon the Dependency Thesis, and motivates the latter by recourse to the characteristics of indexical thinking, it makes a wrong turn in identifying immediate self-awareness as a type of first-person consciousness and articulating it in terms of the Self-Ascription theories advanced by Roderick Chisholm and David Lewis. Here, I intend to avoid the pitfalls of Frank’s approach yet exploit its insights in defending a form of the Ubiquity Thesis that draws upon Hector-Neri Castañeda’s work concerning indexical reference.

**Frank’s Argument for the Ubiquity Thesis**

Central to Frank’s project is a claim that immediate self-awareness does not involve “reference”, nor is its content an “object” of an intentional state or a component of a proposition. Accordingly, immediate self-awareness is non-propositional attitude, viz., it is not a state of consciousness whose content is a proposition or proposition-like structure (Frank 1995a, 188; 1995b, 46). If its content were “objectified”, then, by the Dependency Thesis, another state of awareness whose content is the first state would be implied. An infi-