SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

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Summary
This paper distinguishes between implicit self-related information and explicit self-representation and argues that the latter is required for self-consciousness. It is further argued that self-consciousness requires an awareness of other minds and that this awareness develops over the course of an increasingly complex perspectival differentiation, during which information about self and other that is implicit in early forms of social interaction becomes redescribed into an explicit format.

1. Self-consciousness

What is self-consciousness? Well, it seems to be the case that we have an unmediated, direct access to (at least some) of our mental and bodily states. At this particular moment in time, I know that I am sitting at my desk, looking at the monitor in front of me, thinking about what to write. I am aware of my slight feeling of thirst and of the slight pain in my back. And I seem to be aware of all of this in a very direct, immediate way. In fact, it seems that I know these things in a special way, from the first-person perspective or “from the inside”, so to speak. To be sure, someone else could know these things about myself as well, but they would have to rely on me telling them, or on observing my behavior. They could observe my getting up, walking to the kitchen and fetching a glass of water, and conclude that I must have been thirsty, for example. But I do not need to rely on observation to know about my feeling of thirst, or about the pain in my back. I just know. It is this immediate awareness of

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one's mental and bodily states that we are ultimately after when we speak of self-consciousness.2

Of course, there are many other things that I can know about myself, but that I don't have access to in this immediate way. For instance, I know that I was born in January, because my parents told me so, and I can know that I am wearing a blue sweater because I just looked in the mirror. Similarly, I know what my face looks like from looking in the mirror or from looking at pictures of myself. The way I come to know about these things is not different from the way someone else can come to know them. All these facts about myself can also be learned by someone else, in much the same way that I learn about them, namely from the third person perspective.

In fact, I can even come to know facts about myself from the third person perspective without realizing that they are about myself. For instance, someone might tell me “KM was born in January” and I could fail to understand that this is a piece of information about myself because I am suffering from amnesia and have forgotten my name. Or I might, in passing, glance at a mirror and—without realizing that I am looking into a mirror—think “That person really needs a haircut!” while failing to notice that the person is me. This is not possible when I feel a pain in my back and on the basis of this sensation come to think “I have a pain in my back”, or when I am feeling thirsty and on the basis of this feeling think or say “I am thirsty”. I know these things immediately and there can be no doubt as to who it is that is thirsty or has a hurting back when I form the corresponding judgment. I may have forgotten my name and I may know nothing else about me, but I can still refer to myself with the first-person pronoun in order to self-ascribe a state of thirst or a feeling of pain.

As I just indicated, the canonical expression of self-ascriptions of this latter kind involves the first-person pronoun. Moreover, these self-ascriptions are such that they do not rely on any inference or identification and that there can be no doubt as to who is their subject. In other words, they are “immune to error through misidentification relative to the first person pronoun” (Shoemaker, 1968).3 That is to say that when making

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2. Note that throughout this paper I will follow the common convention of using the terms self-awareness and self-consciousness interchangeably.

3. Notice that not all judgments that involve the first person pronoun are immune to error through misidentification. Rather, it is only those judgments that, as Wittgenstein puts it, use the “I” as subject (as opposed to those where the “I” is used as object). These, in turn, are those that rely on a specific evidence base characteristic of the first person perspective. However, as