

# The Implicit Self in Perception \*

Arnon Cahen

Washington University in St. Louis, Philosophy Department - Philosophy-Neuroscience-Psychology Program (PNP)

## The Punch-Line

In this paper I argue that an appeal to the implicitness of the self can serve to potentially explain distinctive features of phenomenal consciousness only if part of the contents of phenomenal consciousness are essentially self-involving relational properties and that the implicitness of the self is understood in terms of the self being an unarticulated constituent, in Perry's sense (Perry '93, '98), of phenomenal consciousness.

## Introduction – Motivating the Problem. Why appeal to an implicit self?

in response to Hume's 'elusiveness of the self' thesis and Wittgenstein's modified version of the thesis (Wittgenstein, '21); to ground the possibility of self-awareness and secure our knowledge of an objective world (Evans '82; Bermúdez '95, '98); to explain the possibility of judgments that are immune to error through misidentification (Shoemaker '68; Evans '82; Bermúdez '95; Cassam '94);

to explain the distinctiveness of the contents of consciousness.

A few examples of the latter:

Van Gulick ('93, '00, '04)

"The thick phenomenology of experience as being of a world of enduring independent objects depends upon the richness of the viewpoint of the self to which they are present. And in turn the clarity and richness of that viewpoint depends on the complex structure of the experienced world that defines the self's location within it. Self and world are thus interdependent structures within experience..." ('04, p. 82)

"The intentional content of any phenomenal experience always implies the existence of the subject – not merely (blue globe) or even (blue globe here now), but (blue globe seen here/now by me), (blue globe appearing or being present to me as part of my experienced world)... The self is not the explicit object of experience in the ordinary case – the dark blue paperweight is that – but both the self and its relation to the object are implicit in the structure of the state's phenomenal content." ('04, p. 85, my italics) "That sort of implicit reference to self is an essential component of phenomenal content, if not of intentional content in general. It is part of what distinguishes my experiencing the paperweight from merely representing it..." (ibid.)

Noë ('04)

"Perceptual experience is intrinsically perceiver-centered. Visual experience is always experience of things being some way or other from a point of view. Perceptual content has an intrinsically perspectival aspect." (p. 170)

"The perspectival aspect that is an essential feature of conscious perception is accounted for by the perception of perspectival properties, relational properties involving reference to the point of view of the observer. "Perception is thus world-directed and self-directed." (p. 168) Thus, the point of view of the observer must enter into the content of perception so as to explain features of conscious perception.

Eilan ('95)

"For a representation to be conscious is for it to be from a subject's point of view. A representation is from a point of view when the contents of that representation are in part essentially perspectival. "[T]he distinctive feature of conscious perceptions is that whatever other contents they have, their contents will always include a layer of such essentially perspectival contents..." (p. 354) Indeed, "[t]he consciousness of conscious perceptions consists in such essentially perspectivalness." (p. 344)

"Perceptual representations are essentially perspectival, and hence potentially conscious when, among other things, "... intrinsic to a specification of their contents is that the subject is a merely implicit relatum." (p. 345, my italics)

## Research questions and what is NOT argued for

What does it mean to say that the self is implicit rather than explicit in the content of perception in a way such that its being so could potentially explain distinctive features of our phenomenology?

"The main goal of the paper is to give a positive account of the implicit participation of the self in the contents of experience such that it can potentially explain the distinctive nature of the contents of phenomenally conscious representations.

"I do not wish to argue for a broad applicability of any one notion of implicitness of the self to the various puzzles mentioned above. The notion I wish to consider is that which must be utilized in attempting to account for certain distinctive features of conscious perception.

"I do not wish to argue for any particular conception of the distinctiveness of phenomenally conscious perception (examples of which have been brought above). Nor do I wish to argue that the implicitness of the self in the contents of perception is to explain the distinctive way in which we are aware of our environment (whatever that distinctive way is). Nor indeed do I wish to argue that the self in fact is implicit in perception. Although, of course, the positive conclusion of this paper will suggest that the self is in this way implicit.

## A proposed solution

"To say that the self is implicit in perception is to say minimally that our perception informs us not only of the world, but also in some sense of the self doing the perceiving. Though it is our environment that is explicitly represented, e.g. Van Gulick's paperweight, the distinctive way these contents are represented carry information about the specific subject of awareness.

"That is, to say that the self is implicit in perception is minimally to say that perception affords us, in Gibson's terms, self-specifying information (Gibson '79).

"In what sense can the self be implicit in experience, or its contents carry self-specifying information, such that it's being so allows for the potential explanation of the distinctive way we are conscious of our environment?"

### 1. The causal/inferential account

"All events carry information about their causal antecedents. As a result one can become aware of the antecedent in virtue of awareness of the consequence.

"E.g., the level of gas in the tank is implicit in the orientation of the needle, since given the orientation of the gas gauge we can infer with the help of certain causal knowledge we possess the level of the gas in the tank.

"Similarly, the self is implicit in the contents of perception in that these contents carry information about the self as a causal antecedent of the experience.

"Indeed, properties of the self are thus implicit in the contents of perception. We are commonly in a position to judge on the basis of our perceptions and some additional connecting beliefs that some property is instantiated in us. For example, inferring that one's headache is the result of coming home too drunk the previous night upon seeing the keys still in the opposite side of the front door; in being aware of the keys and the door, I become aware of properties of my former self (that I was drunk) and of my present self (that I am dehydrated).

### Problems with the causal/inferential account

"This sense of implicitness is multiply trivial.

"This sense of implicitness, seems to leave the self altogether outside the content of experience.

"Cannot account for the distinctiveness of the way we are aware of the world.

"Thus, if the self is implicit in this sense, which I believe it necessarily is, it cannot be the whole story, if it's being implicit is to potentially account for distinctive features of phenomenal consciousness.

### 2. Constitutive self-specifying information

"A classic example of the self as implicit in perception: Upon perceiving a telephone it is the telephone and certain of its properties that are explicitly represented. One way the telephone is represented as being is as at a certain distance and orientation relative to the observer.

"It is the identity and location of the observer (relative to the telephone) that partially determines which distance and orientation properties the telephone will be represented in experience as having. Thus, minimally we can say that the self is implicit in virtue of the causal dependence between states of our selves and the way particular contents are represented in perception; it is in virtue of this causal relation that the latter carries information about the former.

"But this can't be the whole story for the reasons above.

"In the telephone example, the telephone is represented as being at a certain distance and orientation relative to the subject. This is a relational property, involving both the telephone and the observer, and it is this self-involving relational property that is part of the content of the perception.

"In being aware of the telephone as being at a certain distance it is ipso facto aware of one's own location relative to the telephone. Importantly, the information about one's own location relative to the telephone is available to the subject as part of the contents of the subject's conscious perception, without any need of inference, since the relational property one is made aware of in being aware of the telephone just is a property of one's self.

"But then properties of the self are explicit in the contents of perception. Since the relational property the subject is aware of when experiencing the telephone is part of the content represented, and an awareness of this property just is an awareness of a property of one's self it follows (by transitivity of identity) that the latter too is explicitly represented.

"The self, however, is implicit in that, in being aware of the relational property, one is made aware of only one of the relata; as Eilan said, the self "is a merely implicit relatum".

## \* Acknowledgements and Contact information

Many thanks to José Luis Bermúdez for much valuable help with this paper, as well as to the Washington University in St. Louis and CUNY philosophy departments for helpful comments on previous versions of this paper. Many thanks also to the Mind-Science Foundation for help in travel funding for the purpose of presenting this paper at the ASSC-10.

For further details contact:

Arnon Cahen  
Philosophy Department  
Washington University in St. Louis  
Email: acahen@wustl.edu

## Objections and replies – continued solution

### 1. The metaphysical objection

"The mere fact that a particular experience is of some property an awareness of which just is an awareness of some property of myself, and thus carries some self-specifying information, cannot potentially provide an explanation for the distinctive contents of phenomenal consciousness.

"Example: Perceiving myself through a low resolution T.V. monitor connected to a closed circuit security camera. It is my tallness that is partially causally responsible for the tallness I perceive the person in the monitor as having, thus, in perceiving the tallness of the person I ipso facto perceive my own tallness. However, it could be a superficially similar tall person I see through the T.V. monitor. In such a case, my experience is not of my own tallness and therefore does not involve the self-specifying information present in the original scenario. Yet, the experiences in these two scenarios are phenomenally indistinguishable.

"Thus, the mere metaphysical claim that the property that I perceive instantiated in the world is the selfsame property that belongs to me cannot be sufficient to potentially provide an explanation for the distinctive phenomenology, given that there are many cases in which this metaphysical fact holds and yet the phenomenology is none too distinctive. Alternatively, the fact that in the first scenario the experience carries self-specifying information, rather than other-specifying information, seems to be phenomenologically insignificant; that is, this fact alone makes no distinctive contribution to the phenomenology, and thus, an appeal to this fact can explain nothing about our phenomenology.

### Reply

"The disanalogy between these cases is important to note. In the case involving the distance property I cannot but in perceiving it also perceive a property of my self. In the T.V. monitor example, as the objection shows, I can perceive the tallness instantiated, without thereby perceiving my own tallness.

"Alternatively: I might see someone through the T.V. monitor who is superficially similar to me in many respects, and so see certain properties that are instantiated in him, and though these properties are also instantiated in me, in seeing those properties I do not ipso facto see my own properties – they are different instantiations. Whereas in the distance case, there is no way in which the instantiations can differ – I will always have one and the same property instance as that which is perceived.

"In the T.V. monitor case the phenomenology alone cannot provide us with information that would distinguish between different instantiations of the same property type and that there is a possibility that I am perceiving an instantiation that does not characterize me. In the distance case, on the other hand, the fact that the phenomenology can't distinguish different instantiations of the same property type is unproblematic, since all instances of this property type perceived in this way are guaranteed to be instances that characterize me.

"The relational property one is made aware of is essentially self-involving; one cannot be made aware of this property without thereby being made aware of a property of one's self.

### 2. The objection to transitivity

"It might be claimed that transitivity does not hold in the case of perception. 'y perceives x' it might be argued is an opaque context, thus, we cannot substitute co-referring terms in the context of perception. If this is the case, then my claim that in perceiving the telephone's relative distance I ipso facto perceive a property of my self, and thus that properties of the self are explicitly represented in perception, is an illicit claim.

### Reply

"We need to separate (ala Dretske '69) an epistemic sense from a non-epistemic sense of perceiving. The sense of 'perceiving' that concerns me here, is the non-epistemic sense. And as Dretske argued, the non-epistemic sense follows the substitution principle, that is, if  $x$  is  $F$ , and  $x$  is  $y$ , then  $S$  sees  $F$  (As per an example from Dretske: If you see a vase, then, if the vase is an antique object, you see an antique object, though you might not see that it is an antique). It is the non-epistemic sense that is of most interest here since the aim is to elucidate a particular sense in which the self can be implicit in perception, regardless of whether it is recognized as such.

"Thus, if the relational property in the experience is perceived, i.e., is part of the content of perception, and it is one and the same taken property that belongs to me, then we can substitute the variable within the context of 'I perceive x' the two descriptions of that same property without changing the truth value of the claim that I non-epistemically perceive x.

## Perception of self-involving relational properties – The implicitness of the self revisited

"Though it seems uncontroversial that relational properties are represented in experience (as in when one experiences one object being to the left of another), the relational properties I appeal to are more mysterious. I claim that a relational property can be part of the content of experience even though one of the relata is not represented. Indeed, it is this fact that underlies the sense in which, though properties of the self are explicit in perception, the self remains implicit. How could such self-involving relational properties be part of the content of experience, given that in having the experience one is made perceptually aware of only one of the relata?

### Reply

"Appeal to an analogy with Perry's notion of an unarticulated constituent (Perry '93, '98).

"An unarticulated constituent is a constituent of a proposition that has no corresponding expression in the utterance that expresses that proposition. Perry's original example is the utterance 'It is raining.' As he says, "[i]n this case, I say that the place is an unarticulated constituent of the proposition expressed by the utterance. It is a constituent, because, since rain occurs at a time in a place, there is no truth-evaluable proposition under a place is supplied. It is unarticulated, because there is no morpheme that designates that part." (Perry '98, p. 8) For the expression to have any content an unarticulated constituent must be supplied.

"The content of the utterance contains an n-ary relation, though in the expressed, explicit, features of the utterance we find only an n-1-ary predicand, so that one of the constituents of the content which the utterance in fact expresses remains unarticulated, i.e., implicit.

"The difficulty amounts to a question about the possibility of perceptually representing states of affairs involving n-ary relational properties with vehicles that contain only n-1-ary constituents.

"Analogous to the propositional case, for our experience to be available, for it to have correctness conditions, that is, for it to have a particular content, we must include the self as a constituent of that content, though it is not explicitly represented as an object in the experience.

"In representing the telephone's location I represent it as being in front, for example, but though what the telephone is in front of is not part of the experience it must be included in specifying the correctness conditions for the experience. Just as we can represent the fact that it is raining here by uttering 'it is raining', so we can perceptually represent the relation the telephone bears to our selves by perceptually representing it as being in front. 'Being in front', like 'it is raining', is an n-1-ary constituent of a vehicle which represents an n-ary relation. In other words, we can legitimately say that there is an implicit constituent, in that it participates as part of the content for there to be correctness conditions for the experience, and truth conditions for the propositional case, and yet there is no corollary of that constituent in features of the vehicle which represents this content.

"That we represent such properties in this unarticulated way is not surprising, indeed it is to be expected, given that as perceivers we are invariably in a position in which we cannot receive perceptual information about how the world looks but from our own perspective. We are never in a position to receive perceptual information with regards to the telephone being in front that is not also perceptual information to the effect that the telephone is in front of us. Thus the perceptual representation already has in it, as it were, the content in which the perception is being had as an unarticulated constituent, and it can, therefore, represent an n-ary relational property ("the telephone being in front of me") though in having the perception I am made aware only of the n-1-ary property of the telephone being in front. (See also Perry '98, and Millikan '01)

## Conclusions

I have suggested that for the self to be implicit in the relational content of the experience in a way that could potentially explain distinctive features of our experience of the world it must be the case that part of the contents of our experience are relational properties that make an essential reference to the self. That is, the correctness conditions of the experience are given in part by reference to the obtaining of certain relational properties holding between the self and its environment. Indeed, without such reference, the experience cannot be given correctness conditions, and hence cannot have any content. Furthermore, though certain properties of the self are part of the contents of an experience, the self is implicit in that an awareness of such properties does not involve an awareness of the self, rather, the self is an unarticulated constituent of the experience.

## Bibliography (included in the paper version)

- Aizawa, K. E. M. (1979). 'The First Person'. In Cassam, Q. (Ed.) *Self-Knowledge*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1994).
- Aizawa, K. E. M. *Universals: An Ontological Introduction*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989).
- Bermúdez, J. L. 'Embodied Perception and the Status of a Nonconceptual Part of View'. In Bermúdez, J. L., Marcel, A., Eilan, S. (Eds.) *The Body and the Self*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.
- Bermúdez, J. L. 'The Problem of Self-Consciousness'. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996.
- Cassam, Q. Introduction. In (Ed.) *Self-Knowledge*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1994).
- Cassam, Q. (1986). 'The Social Structure of Perceptual Experience'. *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research* 46(4), pp. 665-71.
- Franklin, F. *Seeing and Knowing*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
- Gibson, J. J. 'Consciousness and the self'. In Bermúdez, J. L., Marcel, A., Eilan, S. (Eds.) *The Body and the Self*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.
- Gibson, J. J. *The Varieties of Experience*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- Gibson, J. J., and Pickrey, Z. W. (1981) 'How Direct is Visual Perception? Some Reflections on Gibson's "Ecological Approach"'. *Cognition*, 9, pp. 139-166.
- Gibson, J. J. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1977).
- Hume, D. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Bk. I, Pt. IV, sect. 15, and Df. 15d.
- Millikan, R. 'The Myth of the Mental Interface'. In Block, A., and DeVidi, S. (Eds.) *Self-Representation: Advances in Consciousness Research* Volume 11. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2001.
- Noë, A. *Action in Perception*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004.
- Quine, C. *The Study of Concepts*. (Cambridge MA: MIT Press/Basil Blackwell, 2002).
- Quine, C. *The Problem of the External Indicated and Other Essays*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).
- Perry, J. 'The Problem of Self-Consciousness and Unarticulated Constituents'. In Block, A., and DeVidi, S. (Eds.) *Self-Representation: Advances in Consciousness Research* Volume 11. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2001.
- Perry, J. (1989). 'Self-Knowledge and Self-Awareness'. In Cassam, Q. (Ed.) *Self-Knowledge*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1994).
- Perry, J. (1993). 'Understanding the Phenomenal Mind'. *Ann. N.Y. Acad. Sci.* 696, pp. 275-305.
- Perry, J. (1995). 'Intentional and Self-Referential Properties, Intention and Self-Awareness'. *Philosophical Topics* 28, pp. 275-305.
- Van Gulick, R. (2000). 'Intentional and Self-Referential Properties, Intention and Self-Awareness'. *Philosophical Topics* 28, pp. 275-305.
- Van Gulick, R. (2001). 'Higher-Order Properties and the Problem of Intentional and Self-Consciousness'. In Gennep, R. (ed.) *Higher-Order Theories of Consciousness*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Co., 2004.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1921) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953.
- Wittgenstein, L. *The Blue and Brown Books*. (New York: Harper, 1958).