

The Debate on the Problem of For-Me-Ness: A Proposed Taxonomy

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Abstract

Several philosophers claim that a mental state is phenomenally conscious only if it exhibits so-called *for-me-ness*, or *subjective character*, i.e., the fact that there is something it is like to be in a conscious state not just for everyone but only *for the subject who undergoes it*. Consequently, they stress, a proper explanation of consciousness requires to address the question of what the nature of for-me-ness is. This question forms what I call the problem of for-me-ness. Although the debate on the problem of for-me-ness has assumed a centre stage within philosophy of consciousness, relatively scant attention has been paid to systematize it. In this paper, I propose to fill this gap by developing a taxonomy of the existing responses to the problem at stake. I start by claiming that for-me-ness—the phenomenon to be explained—is best thought of as a minimal form of self-consciousness. Answering the problem of for-me-ness, hence, means to provide an account of the metaphysical structure of such a phenomenon. Next, I claim that the nature and the structure of minimal self-consciousness can be established by considering five conceptual distinctions. Based on such distinctions, finally, I classify the existing responses to the problem of for-me-ness into five positions. Scholars interested in the debate at issue should find this taxonomy useful not only to recognise and assess the core theses of the existing answer to the problem of for-me-ness but also to develop their own response.

Keywords: For-me-ness, Subjective character, Phenomenal consciousness, Minimal self-consciousness, Phenomenal character.

1. Introduction

Consciousness is the property mental states have when, and only when, they exhibit a so-called phenomenal character, namely, the fact that there is something it is like for their subject to be in these mental states (Nagel 1974). Accounting for the nature of this character forms the problem of consciousness—one of the most central issues in contemporary philosophy of mind.

An important first step in approaching such a problem is to pin down the constitutive features of the phenomenon in need of explanation, that is, the phenomenal character of experience. For many years, philosophers of mind have made this step by equating phenomenal character with the qualitative character

(or dimension) of experience, usually spelled out in terms of the characteristic qualitative properties, or *qualia*, that conscious mental states have and that unconscious states do not.

Recently, however, several philosophers have argued that this conception of the structure of phenomenal character is inadequate (cf. Kriegel 2009; Levine 2001; Zahavi 2014; Zahavi & Kriegel 2015, among others). Conscious mental states, it is claimed, are also essentially characterised by another aspect, corresponding to the fact that they affect their subject in a special way and that no one else is affected by them in the same way. In other words, conscious mental states are not just held by me, but they are also given to me in a first-personal way—they are like something *for me*. Such an aspect of conscious mental states is usually called the *for-me-ness*, or *subjective character*, of the experience, but terms such as *subjectivity* (Levine 2001), *me-ness* (Block 1995), and *first-personal givenness of experience* (Zahavi & Kriegel 2015) are sometimes employed to designate it. In this view, thus, phenomenal character necessarily has two constitutive features: qualitative character and for-me-ness. The former captures the changing aspect of a conscious mental state—that is, what makes a conscious state the conscious state it is—and the latter captures its invariant aspect—that is, what makes a mental state conscious at all (Kriegel 2009).

Putting aside concerns about the correctness of such a view, one significant implication of it has been that, in addition to the traditional issue of qualia, a new problem has emerged as pivotal for understanding consciousness and its nature. This is the problem of explaining the nature of the conscious mental states' being for their subjects. We might call this the *problem of for-me-ness*.

This paper focuses on the problem of for-me-ness. More precisely, this paper aims to develop a taxonomy of the existing responses to the problem at stake. Although the nature of for-me-ness has become a hot topic within the philosophy of consciousness, to date no substantive works have been devoted to systematising the debate that grew up around it. The relevant literature prevalently contains either attempts to address the problem of for-me-ness or defences of the phenomenon at its heart from several forms of scepticism. However, virtually no studies have aimed to take stock of what has become an extended, but increasingly murky, debate. Some recent analyses on the concept of for-me-ness and its cognates might be viewed in this regard (cf. Farrell & McClelland 2017; Guillot 2017; Howell & Thompson 2017), but they, in short, have questioned the existence of a real unified problem of for-me-ness and have suggested that different authors address different questions under the same label. As such, these studies do not really aim at mapping the debate at issue but rather at warning it, or better, criticising it.

I proceed as follows. In Section 2, I clarify what phenomenon is supposed to constitute (or ground) the for-me-ness of experience. In doing so, I provide a description of the phenomenon at issue that is both theoretically illuminating and as free of metaphysical assumptions as possible. I argue that for-me-ness, in its last committal form, is constituted by (or grounded in) a *minimal form of self-consciousness* (or self-awareness),¹ allowing me thus to equate the debate on for-me-ness with the discussion on minimal self-consciousness. In Section 3, then, I outline five distinctions of self-consciousness that are relevant for the phenomenon constituting for-me-ness, or so I suggest. Finally, in Section 4, after having argued that these distinctions are conceptually independent of each other, I classify the

¹ In what follows, I will consider self-consciousness and self-awareness as synonyms.

existing responses to the problem at issue based on the distinctions individuated in the previous section. The final result, it is hoped, will possess sufficient clarity to serve both as a good description of the current state of the debate in question and as a useful theoretical framework for further approaches to the problem of for-me-ness.

2. For-Me-Ness as Minimal Self-consciousness

A preliminary task to develop a taxonomy of the main responses to the problem of for-me-ness is to fix firmly on the phenomenon at its heart, that is, the for-me-ness of experience. Above I noticed that the notion of for-me-ness is intended to refer to the fact that conscious mental states are not just *held* by the subject but also *experientially given to the latter*. As Kriegel (2011) puts it, “when I have a conscious experience, the experience does not occur only *in me*, but also *for me*. There is some sort of direct presence, a subjective significance, of the experience to the subject” (Kriegel 2011: 53).

To a first approximation, this is already sufficient to get a good grasp of what for-me-ness amounts to. To a second approximation, a more precise description is needed. In fact, while characterising for-me-ness as the mental state’s property of *being for the subject who undergoes it* is surely a suggestive—and arguably phenomenologically apt—way of introducing the phenomenon at stake; nevertheless, it maintains a certain degree of ambiguity and conceptual blurriness. It seems appropriate, then, to raise the following further question: What exactly does the phenomenally conscious state’s *being for the subject* consist in?

One might answer by appealing to the conceptual division of labour between qualitative and subjective character and might claim that the latter consists in the substantive commonality among all phenomenal characters. But, still, a sense of vagueness lurks here. What is such a commonality? What phenomenon are philosophers pointing to when they talk about the component that remains constant in the experience? If we are to build a taxonomy of the problem of for-me-ness, an answer to such questions is required, which essentially means arriving at a clear and minimal description of what for-me-ness amounts to. As Levine (2016) effectively points out, before starting any theorising on for-me-ness, “it is important to clarify just what it is for a mental state to be subjective in this way” (Levine 2016: 342).

Let me emphasise that by “clear and minimal”, I mean a description of for-me-ness that satisfies the following two conditions (or desiderata, if you prefer): first, advancing our theoretical understanding of the phenomenon at stake, which means offering a suitable answer to the questions raised above; second, avoiding incorporating too many substantial assumptions, which means to avoid providing a description that says something about the metaphysics of the phenomenon in need of explanation.²

Doing so risks leading to the arbitrariness and accusation of misconstrual, but what motivates me to set such conditions is the ambition to achieve a

² With this I do not want to claim that there are no “metaphysical” assumptions built into the notion of for-me-ness. I only claim that these assumptions are less demanding than an explanation of the ultimate nature of such phenomenon. In other words, this way of describing *for-me-ness* provides an answer to what Van Gulick (2018) calls the ‘descriptive question’.

characterisation of for-me-ness similar to that of qualitative character. As I have noted above, the latter is typically spelled out in terms of the various qualitative properties (or *qualia*) involved in the experience. As far as I can see, this way of characterising qualitative character is both something that advances our theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and something that does not incorporate (at least too much) metaphysical assumptions. If, on the one hand, it claims that qualitative character is constituted by (or grounded in) the qualitative properties of conscious mental states, on the other hand, it is silent on the nature of these properties. Put differently, such a characterisation sheds light on the phenomenon without hiding an answer to what—in the introduction—I called the problem of qualitative character. Similarly, I take a description of for-me-ness ought to do the same theoretical work.

A promising starting point to arrive at this characterisation is to analyse the nature of the property picked out by the term ‘for-me-ness’. Unlike the qualitative character—which seems to pick out a non-relational property of mental states³—the latter, as suggested by the term itself, seems to be a relational property: it is the mental state’s property of *being given to the subject*. Such property, hence, pinpoints a relation between the subject and one of their mental states. Since, arguably, a relational property is grounded in the relation it picks out, it follows that the mental state’s being for me essentially involves the subject bearing a certain relation with their mental state.

What is the nature of such a relation? Interestingly, a common pattern exists that can be recognised in the literature. Consider, for instance, the following passages:

If there is something that makes a conscious experience “for me”, then by having the experience, I must be *somehow aware of having it*. For if I am wholly unaware of my experience, there is no sense in which it could be said to be “for me” (Kriegel 2005: 25, emphasis added).

To say that there is something it is like for a creature to be in a certain mental state is to say that the creature is implicitly *aware of herself being in that mental state* (Janzen 2008: 156, emphasis added).

[The for-me-ness of experience] concerns the fact that when one is directly and noninferentially conscious of one’s own occurrent thoughts, perceptions, or pains, they are characterized by a first-personal givenness that immediately reveals them *as one’s own* (Zahavi 2005: 26, emphasis added).

When abstracted from the details,⁴ Kriegel (2005), Janzen (2008), and Zahavi (2005) agree in claiming that the relation at stake in the for-me-ness of the experience is an epistemic relation in which the subject is somehow aware of the experience. In other words, the idea seems to be that phenomenally conscious mental

³ In describing qualitative character as intrinsic, I only mean to claim that this property is *prima facie* intrinsic, that is, its surface grammar suggests an intrinsic modification of mental states. However, it might well be that—*ultima facie*—qualitative character is relational.

⁴ To be clear, I am not saying that there are not important differences. When one embarks in the project of explaining the nature of the phenomenon in question, such fine-grained “details” play a key role; however, for our purposes here, we can set them aside.

states are not (just) states which give us awareness of the environment around us⁵ but (most of all) states we *are somehow aware of*. And the for-me-ness picks out this awareness exactly.

My contention, therefore, is that, by introducing the for-me-ness of experience, philosophers are pointing to a special *awareness* which—in being not directed outward, to the world and its features, but inward, to something that concerns the mental life itself—can be suitably regarded as a kind of *inner awareness* or *self-awareness*. Moreover, since it accompanies all possible experiences—even in the simplest ones and in the simplest conscious entities—it is reasonable to claim that such self-awareness is the most fundamental or minimal form, namely the one that grounds higher forms. The following is a somewhat loose formalisation of the idea:

MSA: For any mental state M of a subject S, such that S is in M, M has for-me-ness if, and only if, S is (suitably) aware of M.

Call this the *minimal self-awareness principle*.^{6 7}

MSA is meant to capture what for-me-ness is, what the “being for me” of mental states picks out at the phenomenological level. The task of subjectivists, then, is to explain what the nature of such a phenomenon is and how it is instantiated in us. In other words, MSA fixes the data that proponents of for-me-ness aim to explain.

A qualification about the kind of self-awareness at stake here is required. The expression “most fundamental or minimal form” does not endorse any specific thesis about the nature of such a form of self-consciousness. Indeed, one can claim that minimal self-consciousness is a sophisticated cognitive phenomenon that is available months after birth. By contrast, another could maintain that it does not demand any cognitive achievement, but it is relatively simple. Whether these are correct accounts of the phenomenon, they are not *definitional* of “minimal self-consciousness”, but rather they are substantive claims about it. What is definitional of “minimal self-consciousness” is that it is the most fundamental, or minimal, occurrence of self-consciousness.

If what I have said here is on the right track, it follows that for-me-ness in its least committal way is characterizable as the minimal form of self-awareness. Consequently, the problem of for-me-ness can be refined as follows:

The Problem of for-me-ness: What is the (metaphysical) nature of minimal self-consciousness, which constitutes (or grounds) the phenomenally conscious state’s being for me?

⁵ This is the concept of state consciousness endorsed by those philosophers who consider phenomenal character wholly constituted by the qualitative character. To borrow from Drestke (1993), the idea is that phenomenal conscious states are states we “are conscious *with*” (Drestke 1993: 281).

⁶ MSA goes by different names in the literature, such as “inner awareness thesis” (McClelland 2015), “awareness principle” (Kriegel 2018), and “transitivity principle” (Rosenthal 2005). I think, however, that these labels incorporate (or at least risk of incorporating) some bold claims on the phenomenon to be explained.

⁷ The “suitably” clause is just to remark that the inner awareness at stake here is of some peculiar form; that is, not every awareness of M is suitable to constitute the for-me-ness of experience. One way to understand the debate on the nature of for-me-ness is precisely to see it as an attempt to unpack this clause (more on this attempt in Section 4).

To build an appropriate taxonomy of the problem in question, then, we need to understand which features mostly characterise the phenomenon of self-consciousness and, more specifically, the phenomenon of minimal self-consciousness. I do this in the next section.

3. Five Distinctions Characterising Minimal Self-Consciousness

What is the nature of the minimal form of self-consciousness? Is it a cognitively complex phenomenon that requires the acquisition and mastery of conceptual abilities, or is it a mental feature possessed since birth? Is it wholly determined by introspection, or is it present in every moment of our experiential life? Is it a property of a subject, or is its most fundamental occurrence explainable wholly in terms of a property (or relation) of mental states? These and other related questions characterise the problem of minimal self-consciousness, and answering them—for the reasons stated above—means addressing the problem of form-ness.

The literature on self-consciousness is as vast as the literature on consciousness. It thus makes sense to find some criteria to distinguish only theories with substantial differences, collecting under a common label those that diverge only in detail and terminological issues. To accomplish this task, I employ five distinctions that are commonly drawn within the self-consciousness debate and that are both independent and parallel to each other—as I hope will become clear by the end of the discussion. The distinctions are as follows:

1. Creature versus state self-consciousness
2. Egological versus non-egological self-consciousness
3. Pre-reflective versus reflective self-consciousness
4. Representational versus non-representational self-consciousness
5. Conceptual versus non-conceptual self-consciousness.

Within this framework, these distinctions are intended to identify the properties responsible for the substantial disagreement between the scholars involved in the debate about the nature of minimal self-consciousness.⁸

To be sure, additional distinctions can certainly be drawn, but I have restricted myself to these because I consider that they capture the salient features of the phenomenon at stake. Indeed, they concern the status of all three constituents of minimal self-consciousness: the two *relata* and their putative relation. In particular, (1) can be taken to be about the nature of the subject-relatum, (2) can be taken to be about the nature of the object-relatum, and the remaining three can be taken to be about the nature of the awareness relation.

Before introducing them, I would like to clarify some terminological and methodological choices. First, even if we are concerned with self-consciousness, some notions have been introduced and developed independently of this debate. For this reason, a notion is explained at first without referring to the self-consciousness where necessary.

⁸ Worth noticing is that the existence of (at least some) properties putatively picked out by the distinctions in question has been variously contested. It seems thus appropriate to take these distinctions primarily as conceptual ones. However, nothing worrisome for our purposes follows from this, as theories I discuss in Section 4.2 are—at the very least—committed to the existence of the features they ascribe to minimal self-consciousness.

Second, in the case of most distinctions, I talk about “forms” of self-consciousness. Each distinction identifies two different characteristics of self-consciousness. It might therefore be natural to conclude that in choosing one component of the pair, one automatically rejects the existence of the other one. However, if we accept the idea that self-consciousness is a complex phenomenon manifested in different forms and to different degrees, the two features are not necessarily mutually exclusive; they can be features that relate to the different degrees of the phenomenon. For these reasons, I treat most of the distinctions as claims about the existence of forms of self-consciousness, leaving the discussion about minimal self-consciousness to the following section. With these clarifications in place, let us now consider the distinctions in detail.

3.1 A Distinction about the Subject-Relatum of Self-Consciousness

Let us begin with an important distinction concerning the types of entities that can be self-conscious, that is, the one between *creature* and *state self-consciousness*. That self-consciousness is a property borne by certain creatures or, more generally, certain subjects of experience seem uncontroversial. Which creatures are self-conscious is a matter of a vibrant debate both in the philosophical and the scientific field, but it does not undermine the unquestionable claim that subjects of experience—among which normal adult humans are paradigmatic cases—are a type of entity that can entertain self-consciousness.

However, are subjects of experience the *only* type of entity that can be self-conscious? Several philosophers of mind answer this question negatively. In particular, they claim that the relation of self-consciousness can also be borne by subject’s mental states.⁹ To clarify the claim, these authors appeal to the distinction between creature and state consciousness. It is widely held that consciousness is a property applied both to creatures, or subjects, and to particular subjects’ mental states. Since self-consciousness is a kind of consciousness, the reasoning goes that such a distinction can also be applied to self-consciousness. The upshot, therefore, is that, when we talk of self-consciousness, we should distinguish between self-consciousness as a relation borne by the whole individual, the subject of experience, and as a relation borne by the subject’s mental states.

To dispel some initial worries, however, some specifications are in order. First, most advocates of state self-consciousness do not seem to imply that mental states are self-conscious in the same way as creatures are self-conscious.¹⁰ When it comes to being ascribed to mental states, the self-consciousness relation, therefore, tends to be cashed out more metaphorically. Second, those who advocate for state self-consciousness typically do not consider the latter entirely independent from creature self-consciousness,¹¹ but rather, they use it to explain creature self-consciousness. That is, they claim that a subject is self-conscious—as in the self-consciousness at stake in MSA—by virtue of the fact that one of their mental

⁹ See, among others, Kriegel 2004: 3-4; Musholt 2015: introduction; Zahavi 2018: 5.

¹⁰ If for a creature to be self-conscious, it is likely for her to be conscious either of herself or her mental states, what it is for a mental state to be self-conscious is probably different, since mental states, at least *prima facie*, are not the kind of entity that can be *conscious of* something.

¹¹ After all, MSA is formulated in terms of creature self-consciousness.

states is somehow self-conscious. Impressionistically put, the idea is that *state self-consciousness is the source of creature self-consciousness*.¹²

3.2 A Distinction about the Object-Relatum of Self-Consciousness

A second important distinction is between the *egological* and *non-egological* forms of self-consciousness. If the previous distinction focuses on who or what is self-conscious, namely who, or what, is the subject-relatum of the self-awareness relation, the egological/non-egological distinction focuses on what is presented in self-consciousness, that is, what is the object-relatum of the self-awareness relation.

Let me explicate the distinction by the use of an example. Compare “I am conscious of myself seeing a blue sky” to “I am conscious of seeing a blue sky”. According to most philosophers involved in the debate, the awareness relations in the two sentences are both instances of self-consciousness; both are directed inwards to internal mental goings-on. However, they differ significantly with respect to what they are an awareness of. The latter involves merely an awareness of a particular mental state of mine, while the former also involves an awareness of myself and, to this extent, it is a stronger form of self-consciousness. To distinguish between those forms of self-consciousness, philosophers sometimes refer to the stronger variety as egological self-consciousness and the weaker as non-egological self-consciousness.¹³

The above example suggests that the egological/non-egological distinction applies just to creature self-consciousness. However, the distinction applies to state consciousness as well, as is shown by the common practice of using the egological and non-egological categories to refer to the latter.¹⁴ To avoid confusion, we can regiment such a distinction by claiming that egological self-consciousness, in having its content partially constituted by the subject of experience, is a *subject* involving form of self-consciousness, while non-egological self-consciousness, in having its content fully constituted by a particular state that occurs within oneself, is a *mental-state* involving form of self-consciousness.

3.3 Three Distinctions About the Very Self-Consciousness Relation

Let us now turn our attention to some distinctions that do not focus (at least directly) on the two relata of self-awareness but on the very relation. For reasons of clarity, I present them using self-consciousness as a property of subjects. This choice is only for presentation purposes and nothing substantial follows from it. I begin with the distinction between *non-reflective* and *reflective* forms of self-

¹² Guillot (2017) highlights the same grounding claim that I point out here. According to her, several authors endorse what she calls “the state self-awareness” view of for-me-ness, according to which “subjective character, construed as the property mental states exhibit when their subject is aware of them, is constituted by a more primitive awareness those experiences have of themselves” (Guillot 2017: 7). However, I find Guillot’s definition of the “state self-awareness” view too restrictive, insofar as it leaves out those theories of for-me-ness that appeal to an egological form of state self-awareness (more on this notion in Section 4.2).

¹³ The terms “egological” and “non-egological” were originally introduced within the phenomenological tradition, but they have become very popular even in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind.

¹⁴ For a review of the egological and non-egological theories of state self-consciousness, see Sebastián 2012.

consciousness,¹⁵ or—which is typically considered to be conceptually equivalent—*intransitive* and *transitive* forms of self-consciousness.¹⁶

The non-reflective/reflective dichotomy applies primarily to consciousness as such, and it lies in the target of attention. Non-reflective consciousness is the kind of consciousness a subject maintains when their attention is directed outward. The focus of their conscious awareness, thus, is on the external world or, more generally, on objects that are not themselves parts of conscious experiences. By contrast, reflective consciousness is the kind of consciousness a subject maintains when their attention is directed inward by focusing on themselves and their mental states—what is usually called introspection.

There is no doubt that self-consciousness can be present in reflective consciousness. In fact, some would say that introspection is always a kind of self-consciousness. However, several philosophers claim that self-consciousness can also be present in non-reflective consciousness, that is, when the subject's attention is directed outward. Here, for instance, is Goldman:

[Consider] the case of thinking about x or attending to x. In the process of thinking about x there is already an implicit awareness that one is thinking about x. [...] When we are thinking about x, the mind is focused on x, not on our thinking of x. Nevertheless, the process of thinking about x carries with it a *non-reflective self-awareness* (Goldman 1970: 95, emphasis added).

Thus, self-consciousness, besides an introspective (or attentive) form, which involves our reflecting upon ourselves or our own mental states, admits a *non-introspective* (or inattentive) variety, in which we do not entertain any reflective state but, rather, we are self-conscious in a more implicit manner. The distinction between reflective and non-reflective self-consciousness aims at keeping track of this fact.¹⁷

Another important distinction is between representational and non-representational forms of self-consciousness. Since this distinction applies primarily to consciousness rather than self-consciousness, it is expedient to first clarify it in relation to consciousness and, second, to understand its application to self-consciousness.

¹⁵ In the relevant literature, actually, the concept of non-reflective self-consciousness often goes under the label of *pre-reflective* self-consciousness (cf. Miguens, Morando & Preyer 2016; Zahavi 2014, 2019). However, although this term reflects better the context of its introduction, it is often employed to deliver a reading of the distinction at issue that embeds the distinction between representational and non-representational self-consciousness. Here, as a descriptive context, I prefer to stick to a weaker and less theory-loaded reading of the distinction under discussion.

¹⁶ This conceptual equivalence is acknowledged by philosophers of both traditions (cf. Zahavi 2004: 73; Kriegel 2004: 186).

¹⁷ Some readers might question the relevance of this distinction for the nature of for-meness, as there seems to be a straightforward connection between the subject's awareness at stake in MSA and non-reflectivity. Straightforward this link might be, however, it does not seem to take the form of a *logical entailment*. Moreover, this distinction is supposed to discriminate different forms of *state* self-consciousness too—that is, specifically, those involving a higher-order state and those involving a same-order state (see Kriegel 2004). And some philosophers consider the awareness at stake in MSA ultimately grounded in a form of state self-consciousness.

Being in a conscious mental state often—if not always—involves an awareness-of relation connecting the subject of experience with what it is experienced. Take, for instance, perceptual experiences of external objects: consciously seeing a blue sky is to be presented with the bluishness of the sky, and, to this extent, to be aware of (at least some features of) the sky. A straightforward way of construing such an awareness relation is in terms of representation. The idea, very roughly, is that “being aware of x” is a matter of representing x as being in a certain way, that is, harbouring a mental representation that “stands for” x. Thus, when I undergo a conscious experience of a blue sky, I harbour a mental representation that “stands for” the blue sky, and it is by virtue of harbouring such a mental representation that I am aware of the sky.

Given the distinction between representation and what it is represented, construing awareness as a representational relation entails that the connection between the subject and the object of awareness is mediated, and consequently indirect. However, some philosophers have argued that some ways of being conscious of things are so immediate and direct that they cannot be accounted for in representational terms.¹⁸ Accordingly, the relation of awareness has to be construed—at least in some cases—as non-representational in nature. The term “acquaintance” is usually applied to such a non-representational awareness relation, a relationship similar to representation but lacking the typical mediation between the subject and the object of awareness. As stressed by Levine, acquaintance is just not acquaintance without directness and cognitive immediacy (cf. Levine 2019: 35).

If we employ the representational/non-representational distinction to the phenomenon of self-consciousness, the subject of the matter is that in self-consciousness reports, such as “I am conscious of myself”, the “of” of such an awareness could stand for either the “of” of representation or the “of” of acquaintance. In the former case, we are faced with a representational form of self-consciousness, whereas in the latter, we are faced with a non-representational form of self-consciousness.

The last distinction I want to consider is the one between conceptual and non-conceptual forms of self-consciousness. One typical way of characterising self-consciousness is in terms of the subject’s ability to entertain thoughts that are non-accidentally self-related, that is, in terms of the subject’s thinking about themselves *as themselves*. It is widely acknowledged that the canonical expression of the thoughts in question (“I-thoughts”) involves the first-person pronoun “I”. Moreover, since, arguably, the mastery of the first-person pronoun requires the possession of the first-person concept, self-consciousness is typically conceived as a phenomenon that involves the deployment of concepts.

It seems undeniable that such a conceptual self-consciousness exists. Several philosophers, however, claim that more basic forms of self-consciousness, which do not involve the deployments of concepts, need to be recognised.¹⁹ According to Bermúdez, for instance, both visual perception and somatic proprioception are experiences that possess “non-conceptual first-person contents” (Bermúdez 1998:

¹⁸ See, for instance, proponents of so-called ‘naïve realist’ or ‘relational’ theories of perceptual experience, such as Campbell (2002) and Fish (2009), according to whom our perceptual awareness of external object is direct and unmediated.

¹⁹ For an in-depth exposition of this theory, see Bermúdez 1998: ch. 3, Musholt 2015: ch. 2, and Smith 2017: §3.

131) and, as such, they are genuine forms of self-consciousness. The upshot, thus, is that when we talk of self-consciousness, we need to distinguish between those forms that possess conceptual content and those forms that possess non-conceptual content. The former are conceptual forms of self-consciousness, whereas the latter are non-conceptual forms.

4. Ways to Answer the Problem

4.1 Five Pairs of Opposing Theses about Minimal Self-Consciousness

Let us recap the five distinctions schematically by expressing the thesis concerning the minimal form of self-consciousness. Up until now, I have presented most distinctions by talking about the existence of forms of self-consciousness; however, we are not concerned with all forms but only with the minimal (the most fundamental) occurrence of self-consciousness. In this case, for each distinction, only one component of the pair applies to minimal self-consciousness. As a result, each distinction identifies two opposing theses about minimal self-consciousness. They are as follows:

1. Creature self-consciousness (CSC) versus state self-consciousness (SSC)
 - a. (CSC) Minimal self-consciousness is a property of subjects.
 - b. (SSC) Minimal self-consciousness is a property of mental states.
2. Egological (E) versus non-egological (NE)
 - a. (E) Minimal self-consciousness is a subject-involving awareness.
 - b. (NE) Minimal self-consciousness is a mental-state-involving awareness.
3. Pre-reflective (PR) versus reflective (R)
 - a. (PR) Minimal self-consciousness is a pre-reflective (intransitive) awareness.
 - b. (R) Minimal self-consciousness is a reflective (transitive) awareness.
4. Representational (RSC) versus non-representational (NRSC)
 - a. (RSC) Minimal self-consciousness is a representational awareness.
 - b. (NRSC) Minimal self-consciousness is a non-representational awareness.
5. Conceptual (CMSC) versus non-conceptual (NCMSC)
 - a. (CMSC) Minimal self-consciousness requires the mastery of certain conceptual abilities.
 - b. (NCMSC) Minimal self-consciousness does not require the mastery of certain conceptual abilities.

This schema might raise some questions. Specifically, one might wonder if there are redundant pairs of opposing theses. To remove any doubt, let us analyse the conceptual independence between the five distinctions. For some of them, the independence seems quite pacific (e.g., between 1 and 4, 1 and 3, or 2 and 3).²⁰ For other distinctions, independence seems less obvious. For instance, one could claim that 3 and 5 are coextensive. There seems to be a *prima facie* relationship between the mastery of conceptual abilities and the capacity to reflect upon oneself and/or one's own mental states. One natural way to account for such a relationship is in terms of identity. After all, what might introspection ever be, if not a self-direct thought? Moreover, what could the content of a thought be, if not a concept?

²⁰ The distinctions 3 and 4 are also independent unless one endorses the bold reading of 3 that I have discussed in fn15.

Despite its initial appeal, however, several philosophers engaged in the debate on self-consciousness have put pressure on such a claim, particularly those who advocate for thoughts with *nonconceptual content* and those who advocate for a kind of *introspection* that *does not deploy concepts*.²¹ Whether they are correct views is not our concern here; both views imply that the pre-reflective/reflective distinction is not coextensive with the non-conceptual/conceptual distinction, and this is all we need to make a (*prima facie*) case for the independence between 3 and 5.

4.2. Five Theories on Minimal Self-Consciousness

At our disposal now are five independent pairs of opposing theses on minimal self-consciousness. With these pairs in place, we can classify the various responses to the problem of for-me-ness into five different positions—or classes of positions—which I call to highlight their characteristic claims: (a) *state reflectivism*, (b) *state non-conceptualism*, (c) *state non-reflectivism*, (d) *state non-representationalism*, and (e) *creature non-representationalism*.^{22 23} While they do not exhaust the whole space of logically possible approaches to the problem, this should not be concerning, as my goal here is just to capture the main positions advocated in the literature.

(a) *State reflectivism* considers minimal self-consciousness to be ultimately a state self-conscious phenomenon, where a mental state is directed at (“is aware of”) another mental state, by representing it *as owned by the subject* and by making it a state the subject is conscious of—that is, a state that is “for me”. According to this view, minimal self-consciousness is a property of mental states because it is a subject’s mental state—which we can call, by adopting the logical jargon, the second-order state—that targets another subject’s mental state—which we can the first-order state—and not (at least directly) the subject themselves.²⁴

It is worth noting two things here: first, the second-order state has to be called a self-conscious state because the subject of experience is represented in its content—it is a form of egological state self-consciousness; second, since the content of the second-order state has a quite complex form—viz “*I am in this mental state*”—it is taken to be a *conceptual* mental state (typically a thought). Examples of *state reflectivism* are HOT theories of consciousness, according to which a conscious mental state is a state which is the object of a conceptual higher-order thought. Whether such conceptual high-order thoughts are innate or acquired is controversial among the supporters of HOT; for example, Gennaro (2012) argues for an innatist view, while Carruthers (2000) claims that conceptual abilities to exhibit consciousness develop in tandem with the Theory of Mind (ToM). In conclusion, *state reflectivism* addresses the problem of for-me-ness by claiming that for-me-ness is constituted by (or grounded in) a *reflective, egological, representational, and conceptual* form of state self-consciousness. Philosophers who endorse some

²¹ For a review of philosophers who argue for the existence of a thought’s non-conceptual content, see Muscholt 2015: ch. 3. For a defense of a nonconceptual form of introspection, see Giustina & Kriegel 2017.

²² Remember that, at the end of Section 2, we defined the problem of for-me-ness as the problem of understanding the nature of minimal self-consciousness.

²³ These positions might sound unfamiliar to the reader. Actually, they are unfamiliar in terminological terms but, arguably, not in substantive terms. In fact, as we will see in a moment, some of the leading accounts along their lines are quite familiar in the debate over the nature of consciousness.

²⁴ Cf. Gennaro 2012; Rosenthal 2005; Carruthers 2000.

version of this theory include Carruthers (2000), Gennaro (2012), and Rosenthal (1998, 2005).

The second position is the one I call (b) *state non-conceptualism*, according to which minimal self-consciousness is ultimately thought to be a kind of state self-consciousness, where a perceptual mental state is directed at (“is aware of”) another mental state, by representing it and, thus, by transforming it into a phenomenally conscious state. As the reader has likely already noticed, state non-conceptualism shares the spirit of (a) but differs from the latter because the higher-order state is taken to be non-conceptual. This non-conceptual view is the reason why the content of the higher-order state is usually considered not to be subject-involving, but only mental state-involving. It is a non-egological kind of state self-consciousness. Paradigmatic cases of *non-conceptualism* are HOP (high-order perception) theories of consciousness.

To sum up, state non-conceptualism addresses the problem of for-me-ness by claiming that for-me-ness is constituted by (or grounded in) a *reflective, non-egological, representational, and non-conceptual* form of state self-consciousness. Philosophers who endorse some version of this view include Armstrong (1968) and Lycan (1996).

A third position is (c) *state representationalism*, according to which minimal self-consciousness consists ultimately in a particular reflexive awareness, that is, a subject’s mental state representation of itself. In this view, the minimal self-consciousness constituting the for-me-ness of experience is an occurrence of a representational and non-egological form of state self-consciousness.

State representationalism is similar to the previous views in considering the awareness constituting the for-me-ness of experience ultimately as a relation borne by a subject’s mental states, but it is dissimilar to them because it denies the idea that minimal self-consciousness is a reflective phenomenon—that is, it is not a matter of a mental state to be “aware of” *another* mental state. In addition, in contrast with (a), this theory denies that the self-representing state necessarily has a conceptual nature. Paradigmatic cases of state representationalism are self-representational theories of consciousness, according to which a mental state is conscious if it represents itself (in the right way).

To sum up, state representationalism is a position that considers for-me-ness ultimately constituted by a *pre-reflective, non-egological, representational, and non-conceptual* form of state self-consciousness. Philosophers who endorse some version of this view include Kriegel (2009), Caston (2002), and Williford (2006).

A fourth common position is (d) *state non-representationalism*, which considers minimal self-consciousness an intrinsic property of mental states that is not accountable in representational terms. As with (c), state non-representationalism claims that experiences have a reflexive structure, owing to which any experience is immediately aware of itself and thereby given to the subject who undergoes it. But supporters of (d) deny the idea that the experience represents itself. By contrast, they often account for the relation that the experience entertains with itself in terms of self-acquaintance (cf. Williford 2019). State non-representationalism therefore construes the minimal self-consciousness that ultimately grounds the for-me-ness of experience as a *pre-reflective, non-egological, non-representational, and non-conceptual* form of state self-consciousness. Philosophers who embrace some version of this view include Smith (1989), Williford (2019), and Zahavi (2005, 2014).

The fifth, and last, position I consider is (e) *creature non-representationalism*, according to which minimal self-consciousness is constituted by (or grounded in) a non-intentional relation ultimately borne by the subject of experience. The idea, here, is that the subject, by virtue of being aware of having the experience, is immediately aware of themselves as the bearer of the experience, and this awareness makes the experience precisely “for me”. Such a form of self-consciousness is not taken to be representational and, usually, it is accounted for in terms of acquaintance. According to supporters of (e), any conscious phenomenon, from the simplest to the most complex one, displays such a primitive subject’s self-awareness. As Nida-Rümelin puts it,

[B]eing presented with something necessarily involves being pre-reflectively and pre-conceptually aware of being the subject to whom something is presented. [...] According to the view here proposed, pre-reflective self-awareness is an awareness of oneself as an experiencing subject (Nida-Rümelin 2017: 12).

As the reader may have already noticed, *creature non-representationalism*, by claiming that for-me-ness is ultimately constituted by (or grounded in) a kind of creature self-consciousness, differs from all the previous positions. It does not explain the subject’s self-consciousness in terms of a more primitive self-consciousness relation of some subject’s mental state. We can thus conclude that creature non-representationalism is a theory that considers for-me-ness grounded in a *pre-reflective, egological, non-representational, and non-conceptual* form of creature self-consciousness. Such a view is much less popular in the literature, but it is not without its defenders, such as Duncan (2018) and Nida-Rümelin (2017).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I made three main claims about the problem of for-me-ness to systematise the philosophical debate that grew up around it. In Section 2, I claimed that for-me-ness—the phenomenon to be explained—is best thought of as minimal self-consciousness. In Section 3, I claimed that the nature and the structure of the phenomenon at stake can be established by considering five distinctions: (i) creature versus state self-consciousness, (ii) egological versus non-egological self-consciousness, (iii) reflective versus pre-reflective self-consciousness, (iv) representational versus non-representational self-consciousness and (v) conceptual versus non-conceptual self-consciousness. In Section 4, based on such distinctions, I claimed that the following five positions capture the main existing accounts of the nature of for-me-ness: (a) state reflectivism, (b) state non-conceptualism, (c) state representationalism, (d) state non-representationalism, and (e) creature non-representationalism.

Although the primary goal of the proposed taxonomy is to take a step towards a proper systematisation of the debate on the problem of for-me-ness, its relevance goes beyond a mere description of the current state of this debate. By identifying those aspects that a theory needs to take into account to qualify itself as a response to the problem of for-me-ness, the taxonomy provides us with an analytical framework for better approaching the problem under discussion. According to the framework proposed herein, addressing the problem of for-me-ness means taking a stance on (at least) one pair of opposing theses among those stated in Section 4.1, fixing the constitutive aspects of minimal self-consciousness. More precisely, if we take a

stance on just some pairs, we provide a *partial* response to the problem, but if we take a stance on all of them, we provide a *full* response to it.

To be sure, this is no to say that it is the only viable framework; alternative ways to frame the problem of for-me-ness are possible and, plausibly, they will reflect the same actual space of debate captured by my taxonomy. As far as I know, however, such alternative frameworks are not present. Furthermore, framing the problem of for-me-ness in this way is particularly profitable for at least two reasons. First, by making transparent the definitional theses of the main theories of for-me-ness, it enables us to get a grip on the most popular theses about the nature of minimal self-consciousness. Second, it enables us to develop different strategies to address the problem. One can, for instance, take a stance on one thesis about the nature of minimal self-consciousness either by arguing for it or by arguing against its opposite thesis.

Scholars involved in the debate should therefore find this taxonomy useful not only to recognise and assess the core theses of the existing answer to the problem of for-me-ness but also to develop their own response.²⁵

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²⁵ Materials of this paper were presented at the "Philosophy of Mind and Subjectivity" symposium, hosted within the 13th conference of the Italian Society for Analytic Philosophy (SIFA) in Novara. I am grateful to the organisers of this symposium, as well as the audience there. I am especially grateful to Alfredo Tomasetta for discussing at length a previous version of this paper with me. I would also like to thank two anonymous referees of *Argumenta* for their useful comments and remarks.

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