**‘Self-Awareness and the ‘I’ in the Phenomenological Tradition’**

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**Abstract**

The Phenomenological tradition is substantially defined by its attempt to rethink the self and self-awareness. This chapter provides an overview and analysis of some of the fundamental developments within that tradition running from Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty through to later writers such as Henry. I begin by sketching the key features of the movement: its relationship to naturalistic and transcendental approaches, the centrality of the first person perspective, and the hierarchical model of experience which is central to Phenomenology’s vision of experience and to the historiography of the tradition. I next introduce the specifics of Phenomenology’s picture of self-awareness, positioning it between the spectatorial model found in Brentano and a Kantian intellectualism. I then present and analyse some of the key innovations of the tradition: Sartre’s notion of non-positional self-consciousness, Heidegger on the links between the self and the social, and finally Merleau-Ponty’s conception of embodiment.

Phenomenology - Heidegger - Sartre - Merleau-Ponty - Self-Awareness - First Person

**(§1) Introduction**

The Phenomenological tradition is substantially defined by its attempt to rethink the self and self-awareness. I begin with a few remarks situating this approach, before setting out the key themes of the discussion.

There is a sense in which a wide range of philosophical schools might seek to analyse the “phenomeology” of something. But the focus of this chapter is on the historical movement that begins with Edmund Husserl and runs through figures such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the period leading up to World War Two: in what follows, I use the capitalised form “Phenomenology” to refer specifically to this movement. The tradition does not, of course, terminate in 1945, and I briefly discuss post-war work such as that by Michel Henry. However, many of the most interesting post-war developments hang on the interaction between Phenomenology and Structuralism and Post-Structuralism: Derrida’s early thought being the most influential. Others post-war changes rely on large scale methodological shifts that cannot be adequately treated here: for example, Levinas’s attempt to centre philosophy around ethics and the model of the self that emerges from it.

Even when historically delineated like this, Phenomenology displays huge variance in methods, terminology and commitments: it would be highly controversial to claim that Husserl or Heidegger share a common conception of how to do philosophy. Thus, Heidegger describes his 1923 lecture course, *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, as “striking the main blow against phenomenology”: what he takes himself to have attacked is of course *Husserl’s* Phenomeology.[[1]](#footnote-1) But we can begin with some generalisations.

First, Phenomenology examines the way in which the world, broadly construed, is experienced by or made manifest to us. This experience is meaningful structured – I do not simply see a series of colour patches, but chairs and tables – and Phenomenology analyses the process by which this meaning and order is generated and sustained. The self thus figures under two aspects. On the one hand, it is itself manifest in distinctive ways: for example, my awareness of my own body or my own beliefs is different from my awareness of your body or your beliefs. On the other, it constitutes or partly constitutes the manner in which I am aware of other entities: for example, my physical embodiment shapes the way in which I encounter things around me. As Husserl puts it, in a framing with obvious Kantian echoes, the “paradox of human subjectivity” is that it is both a “subject for the world and at the same time…an object in the world”, and an object of highly distinctive kind at that (Cri:178).

Second, Phenomenology is essentially an anti-naturalistic movement. By “naturalism”, I mean a conception of philosophy as continuous with the empirical sciences, with their methods and with their models of causation. So, for example Husserl complains that Brentano’s “naturalistic prejudices” have hampered his grasp of the “most essential matters” (Cri:234). One way to motivate the point is by stressing Phenomenology’s transcendental dimension: for the Phenomenologist, the natural sciences investigate connections between entities whose manifestation is already assumed or taken for granted. Naturalism is thus guilty of what Husserl dubbed “transcendental naiveté” (Cri:193).[[2]](#footnote-2) Another way to motivate the point is by focusing on normativity: the natural sciences require but cannot themselves justify normative notions such logic and reason. Both lines of motivation lead directly to a confrontation with psychology. Within the transcendental motif, psychology is typically dismissed as addressing an ill-formed subset of entities, “psychic” or “mental” ones, rather than explaining our access to entities in general (Cri:204); within the normative motif, it is accused of psychologism, of degrading facts about logic to natural facts about the psychology of the human species.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Third, Phenomenology places immense weight on the first-person perspective and on a close description of our temporal and spatial awareness. Particularly important is the attempt to recover a pre-theoretical account of such experience, one distinct from mathematical treatments of time and space: as Heidegger stresses, the friend across the street is “nearer” in an experiential sense than the glasses on your nose (BT:141). The details of Phenomenology’s stance on time are particularly complex. One of Husserl’s most influential claims is that the canon has misconstrued temporal consciousness, for example the successive awareness of the notes of a melody.[[4]](#footnote-4) His argument builds on and challenges the treatment of temporal awareness in both Hume and Kant – just as it is a standard Kantian move to argue that Humean associationism fails to explain our experience of temporal relations, it is a standard Phenomenological one to attack Kant for the role he gives the understanding or causation in his analysis of time.[[5]](#footnote-5) Husserl’s treatment of time consciousness is radically extended by Heidegger: his basic contention is that we are defined by our temporality, conditioned by our past and orientating ourselves towards some future goal (BT:374).

Fourth, Phenomenology thinks of experience in layered terms with more fundamental forms making possible more derivative ones. Husserl’s *Crisis* gives a classic formulation of this: modern science is possible only on the basis of an explanatorily prior and pre-theoretic “life world” (Cri:48). The task is to conduct a rigorous investigation into this “subsoil”.

There has never been a scientific inquiry into the way in which the life-world constantly functions as subsoil, into how its manifold prelogical validities act as grounds for the logical ones, for theoretical truths. (Cri:124)

Doing so will require study of the web of “syntheses…meaning formed out of elementary intentionalities” which underlie any scientific engagement (Cri:168). One can see immediately, however, that there are multiple senses of priority in play here. A pragmatist might argue that scientific theorizing emerges from practical, everyday concerns, whilst a non-conceptualist might argue that scientific theorizing emerges from the relatively unstructured contents of perception: these two senses of priority and their attendant “subsoils” are not necessarily equivalent. Matters are complicated by the fact that later Phenomenologists frequently position their own predecessors as having failed to penetrate the priority structure fully. Merleau-Ponty, for example, talks of:

A latent intentionality like that which animates time, more ancient than human *acts…*[such intentionality] could not possibly reach completion in the intellectual possession of a *noema*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The reference to “intellectual possession of a *noema*” is a jibe at Husserl, standardly portrayed by subsequent Phenomenologists as intellectualising experience: this remark thus exhibits both the hierarchical structure noted and the patricidal role it frequently played. [[7]](#footnote-7) This hierarchical model of experience also meshes with the others strands already highlighted: Heidegger, for example, regards the experience of space-time mapped by the modern mathematical sciences as explanatorily derivative on a prior familiarity with the everyday world (BT:135).

Each of the topics touched on deserves and has received vast discussion in its own right. There are many others that would be essential to the full picture. An obvious one is the relationship between Phenomenology and Kantianism: Husserl contrasts his own transcendentalism with Kant’s, supposedly reliant on a misleading regressive method (Cri:115), and Heidegger’s work up until the mid-1930s is full of Critical motifs.[[8]](#footnote-8) There is a deeper, structural issue here too: given the focus on first person experience, particularly when framed transcendentally, almost *every* part of Phenomenological philosophy is a story about the self in some significant sense. This means that the kind of neat taxonomy, dividing topics up into philosophy of religion or language or metaphysics that one finds in other traditions is not possible in Phenomenology. Sartre’s philosophy of religion, to take a single example, is essentially a story about our capacities, biases and drives: God is to be understood in terms of a fantasy in which a human being that is essentially “for-itself”, i.e. self-conscious, free and thus faced with the obligation to make choices, imagines a being that is self-conscious and yet somehow immutable and static, and which thus offers an escape from the necessity of decision (BN:587). This type of interdependence means that a full account of the self in each of the Phenomenological systems is inextricable from a full account of those systems, a task beyond the scope of this chapter.

My approach therefore will be itself phenomenological in a broad sense: rather than asking about the self directly, I will focus on the question of self-awareness, of our conception and experience of the “I”. I will highlight three aspects of Phenomenology’s vision in particular: its anti-intellectualism, its emphasis on everyday experience and on inter-subjectivity, and its stress on embodiment. But before getting to Phenomenology’s positive proposals, we need to look more closely at where it thought earlier philosophy had gone wrong.

**(§2)** **Phenomenology’s Negative Claims: Egos, Judgement and Reflection**

As noted, one point common across the Phenomenological tradition is an emphasis on first-person experience; furthermore, Phenomenologists share a conviction that such experience is essentially self-aware. As Husserl puts it, “To be a subject is to be in the mode of being aware of oneself”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Phenomenology’s treatment of this self-awareness is conditioned by two themes.

On the one hand, the aim is to analyse self-awareness in a way that distinguishes it from an awareness of objects. Brentano is again a useful counterpoint. As he saw it, the self was a “secondary object” of all my acts: intentionality was thus essentially reflexive.

The fact that the mentally active subject has himself as object of secondary reference, regardless of what else he refers to as his primary objects, is of great importance. As a result of this fact there are no statements about primary objects which do not include several assertions. If I say, for example, “God exists” I am at the same time attesting to the fact that I judge that God exists.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This “secondary” status, the self is confined to the periphery of the visual field so to speak, is intended to capture the distinctive and elusive nature of such self-reference: after all, it would come as a surprise to many agents that their every world-directed assertion also includes a claim about themselves. One problem with the appeal to “secondary objects” is that such accounts appear problematically ‘spectatorial’: as Moran puts it, it offers an “essentially superficial view of the differences between my relation to myself and my possible relation to others” – I am observer of myself just as I am of other objects, with the difference lying simply in the quality and frequency of the perception (Moran 2001:91). Phenomenology shares this basic concern: self-awareness for it is paradigmatically different from object-awareness. To cite Husserl, “the being of experience is not the being of objects [*Erlebtsein ist nicht Gegenständlichsein*]” (Husserl 1984:669). The objection is echoed by later authors: in Heideggerian terms, Dasein is not present-at-hand (BT:73). This commitment drives Phenomenological attacks on the ego, where that is understood as some kind of distinctive object to which I have privileged access. As Sartre observed, such objects lack phenomenological warrant: “when I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in looking at a portrait, no I is present…There is no place for *me* on this level”.[[11]](#footnote-11)

On the other hand, however, Phenomeology is reluctant to embrace the classic Kantian response to this insight. Kant distinguished two modes of self-awareness. One, inner sense, is essentially a perceptual and passive form of awareness, and it plays a comparatively limited role in his system (see, for example, CPR:A22/B37). Much more important is apperception, an awareness of ourselves as active (CPR:B155-7). This form of self-awareness is distinct from any object-awareness; in Kantian terms, we have no intuition of it (CPR:B157-8).[[12]](#footnote-12) From this perspective, Brentano’s talk of the self as a “secondary object” fatally confuses the two modes. Kant’s appeal to a distinctively active form of self-knowledge was to become one of the hallmarks of German Idealism. Here is Fichte stressing both its omnipresence in object-cognition and its radical difference from such object-cognition:

No object comes to consciousness except under the condition that I am aware of myself, the conscious subject…you directly note activity and freedom in this thinking… Your thinking is for you an *acting*. (Original emphasis )[[13]](#footnote-13)

For both Kant and German Idealism, judgement and self-awareness are thus inextricably bound. This is partly because judgement is not simply a matter of a system recalibrating its content as the environment shifts: as Moran notes were that the case, it could happen entirely subpersonally (Moran 2001:110). Instead, it consists in taking on a series of commitments, in Kantian terms giving myself rules: to judge that ‘if p then q’, as opposed to simply parroting out the words, is to understand myself as committed to various other inferences (Kant 1998:A104-6). In short, “judging is apperceptive… to judge is not only to be aware of what one is judging, but that one is judging, asserting, claiming something” (Pippin 2014:153). Brentano’s secondary object is thus replaced by an essentially self-referential form of action, one of judgement and ultimately objective systematisation.

In referring his thoughts to ‘I’, the thinker (perceiver, imaginer) is doing nothing more than committing himself to the unity and consistency of his thoughts, and committing himself to obtaining a unified standpoint that could be shared by all: an objective standpoint, also called by Kant “objective unity of apperception.[[14]](#footnote-14)

But whilst Phenomenology shares Kant’s concern to distinguish self-awareness from object-awareness, it is far less willing to accept this equation of self-awareness and thought or judgement. There are two main reason for this.

First, Phenomenology understands itself as arising from the everyday, from the “lifeworld”: in this it positions itself against the supposedly intellectualist biases of the tradition. For Heidegger, for example, Kantian cognition, and the judgements which are a necessary part of it, is a derivative form of experience. (BT:86-7): Heidegger’s own preferred examples involve the fluid exercise of skills, often cashed as a type of ‘know how’ irreducible to propositional content.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Second, Phenomenologists tend to read Kant in a way which places great stress on the links between self-consciousness and reflection. They are not alone in doing this. For Korsgaard, one of the prominent contemporary Kantians, “the human mind is self-conscious in the sense that it is essentially reflective”; it possesses the capacity to take up a distance from our first order desires or perceptions, so putting them into question.[[16]](#footnote-16) In this sense, self-consciousness “introduces what, following Plato, I will call the parts of the soul”.[[17]](#footnote-17) From a Phenomenological point of view, this move is immediately vulnerable to the retort that such reflective distancing is comparatively rare and thus cannot be the primary form of self-awareness. Heidegger makes exactly that point regarding transcendental apperception.

*In what way is the self given?* Not – as might be thought in adherence to Kant – in such a way that an I think accompanies all representations…which would thus be a reflective act directed at the first act.[[18]](#footnote-18) (Original emphasis)

In making this move, Phenomenological theories characteristically adduce cases of seamless, utterly absorbed action in which an agent, for example a sportsperson, is responding simultaneously to multiple rapidly changing variables: from the recollections of Superbowl MVP Phil Simms to those Larry Bird, these examples are standardly used by Phenomenologists to argue that self-awareness cannot be primarily a matter of detached reflection.[[19]](#footnote-19) This line of thought acquires particular significance for authors seeking to separate themselves from Husserl: the charge, as Frank put it, is that “Husserl does not know any other concept of self-awareness than the reflective one”.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Phenomenology thus shares Kant’s stress on the distinction between awareness of the self and awareness of objects. It is, however, deeply suspicious of the way in which Kant, and later German Idealism thought through those notions; in line with its hierarchical model of experience, it tends to view such analyses as derivative, rather than simply false.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**(§3) Phenomenology’s Positive Claims: Sartre, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty**

Having introduced some of Phenomenology’s objections to earlier treatments of self-awareness, I want now to turn to its own positive story. I press three aspects of the Phenomenological approach: its anti-intellectualism, its emphasis on everyday experience and on the intersubjectivity bound up with social life, and the stress it places on embodiment. In order to bring these into focus and to link to the historical texts, I look at

Sartre, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in turn. In separating these themes and figures, I am not implying that they are in any sense incompatible, nor do I want to take a position on how much textual overlap or influence there might be between them. I also try to avoid relying on the intricate terminology that characterises much Phenomenological writing, particularly Heidegger’s. My principal aim is to offer a clear overview of some of the central philosophical moves made by Phenomenology in analysing self-awareness.

**(§3a) Sartre and Non-Positional Self-Consciousness**

Sartre’s treatment of self-awareness in his 1943 magnum opus *Being and Nothingness* begins from a point that is meant to both echo and to contest earlier accounts. Imagine absentmindedly counting the cigarettes in a packet: if you were suddenly asked what you were doing, you would be able to reply “at once” even though you had not previously thought about it (BN:liii). Contra Descartes, the primal form of self-awareness is thus not a matter of thought: “quite the contrary, [there is] a non-reflective consciousness…which is the condition of the Cartesian cogito”, i.e. the condition of the explicit report describing my activity that I can subsequently make (BN:liii). Contra Kant, the explanation Sartre gives for this self-awareness is rooted not in the understanding but in the nature of consciousness itself. For Kant, self-consciousness, the “I think”, is tied to the understanding, itself cashed in terms of judgement (CPR:A70-80/B95-106), capacities which very young infants and non-human animals lack. In modern terms, Kant thus links self-awareness, or at least the active form of it important for his system, to linguistic capacities.[[22]](#footnote-22) As he puts it in his *Anthropology*:

The fact that the human being can have the ‘I’ in his representations raises him infinitely above all other living beings on earth…When [a child] starts to speak by means of ‘I’ a light seems to dawn on him, as it were, and from that day on he never again returns to his former way of speaking. – Before he merely *felt* himself, now he *thinks* himself. (Original emphasis)[[23]](#footnote-23)

In contrast, in Sartre, the argument for self-consciousness works from *any* state with a phenomenology, in the sense of there being ‘something it is like to undergo it’. His basic intuition is that it is incoherent to speak of such a consciousness that is not self-conscious, since that would imply consciousness of which the subject was unaware, which would then not be conscious. This is his summary:

This self-consciousness we ought to consider not as a new consciousness, but as the only mode of, existence which is possible for a consciousness of something. Just as an extended object is compelled to exist according to three dimensions, so an intention, a pleasure, a grief can exist only as immediate self-consciousness. (BN: liv)

Sartre refers to this as “non-positional self-consciousness”, and it is closely aligned with what Goldman called “non-reflective self-awareness” and what Kriegel labels “intransitive self-consciousness”.[[24]](#footnote-24) Self-awareness is not an awareness of some unique object – there is no ego hiding in the background – nor is it an awareness of the understanding in action. Instead, it is a form of reflexive intentionality built into the fabric of phenomenally conscious, as opposed to unconscious, states.

Sartre’s claim is open to several lines of development, depending on how one glosses the “non-positional self-awareness”. For example, there is a delicate question as to how his theory relates to “Higher Order Theories” such as Rosenthal’s: one prima facie difference is that Sartre seems to regard consciousness as an intrinsic property of the relevant states, whereas on Rosenthal’s account it is an extrinsic function of their relation to some higher order thought.[[25]](#footnote-25) But the point I want to emphasise is the anti-intellectualist shift away from an analysis of self-consciousness in terms of language or understanding and towards a focus on it as intrinsic to any conscious state. This sets the stage for later writers such as Michel Henry, where, taking up Sartre’s language of “ipseity”, the notion of self-awareness is again cashed in extremely thin terms. Zahavi provides a helpful formulation of Henry’s position:

As Michel Henry would have put it, the most basic form of selfhood is the one constituted by the very self-manifestation of experience…To be conscious of oneself, consequently, is not to capture a pure self that exists in separation from the stream of consciousness, but rather entails just being conscious of an experience in its first-personal mode of givenness; it is a question of having first-personal access to one’s own experiential life.[[26]](#footnote-26)

In response to such moves, one might raise two worries. First, once the Kantian emphasis on activity has been removed, how does talk of non-positional self-awareness really differ from Brentano’s “secondary objects”? Second, approaches like Henry’s leave us with a very broad and basic conception of self-awareness: indeed, the example Zahavi uses is privileged access to pain sensations.[[27]](#footnote-27) One natural concern is that this elides important distinctions – for example between what Baker calls “weak” first personal phenomena, characteristic of any being with an egocentric perspective and the very different “strong” self-awareness found in concept users (this echoes, of course, Kant’s original divide between active and passive forms of self-consciousness).[[28]](#footnote-28)

**(§3b) Heidegger on Self-Understanding and the Social World**

The next cluster of issues are well illustrated by Heidegger’s early work, particularly 1927’s *Being and Time*. Heidegger starts by positing a basic unity, “being-in-the-world”, which precedes any distinction between self- and object-awareness. As he puts it in his lectures on Aristotle, experience is primarily “*selbstweltlich*” or “self-worldly”.[[29]](#footnote-29) This unity is articulated in terms of what he calls a “for-the-sake-of-which”: this refers to the agent’s self-understanding, where that is cashed in terms of the norms to which the agent is committed, the skills she exercises in pursuing them and the shifting configuration of the world which is thus manifest to her (BT:120). To take a simple example, Sarah understands himself as a professor insofar as she encounters and evaluates the world in terms of that identity. Here is Heidegger’s own description of the attendant phenomenology:

Coming into the lecture-room, I see the lectern…What do “I” see? Brown surfaces, at right angles to one another? No, I see something else. Is it a largish box with another smaller one set on top of it? Not at all. I see the lectern at which I am to speak. You see the lectern from which you are to be addressed and from which I have previously spoken to you…I see the lectern in one fell swoop, so to speak, and not in isolation, but as adjusted a bit too high for me. I see – and immediately so – a book lying upon it as annoying to me (a book, not a collection of layered pages with black marks strewn across them).[[30]](#footnote-30)

The result is a picture of the world in which normativity, the individuation of entities, and our self-understanding go hand in hand: objects are encountered as means to specific ends, tasks appear as desirable or obligatory, all manifest, or in Heideggerian terms “disclosed”, on the basis of the agent’s self-understanding (BT:236). The self is thus mirrored in the pattern of what many contemporary Heideggerians call worldly “affordances and solicitations”: for Sarah, the pile of scripts “affords” reading, whilst for Sam, the room cleaner, it is simply an obstacle to be moved aside. The result, as Crowell puts it, is that:

I am constantly self-aware because I discover myself in what I do: I am aware of myself ‘as’ a carpenter, father, or teacher because the things that surround me show me the face that they show to one who acts as a carpenter, father, or teacher does.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Similarly, Okrent:

Heidegger thinks that we primarily find ourselves reflected back from the way we intend things in the course of acting unreflectively on our intentions…My being a professor is thus ‘reflected back’ to me from my concern with things. I know myself to be a professor because I find myself caring about things in the way professor do, and pursing the ends that they pursue.[[32]](#footnote-32)

As these examples suggest, the Heideggerian world necessarily includes other agents: to understand oneself as a professor is to understand some as colleagues, some as students (BT:154-6). In this sense, Heidegger’s picture is an essentially intersubjective one: I always operate against the existing backdrop of publicly accepted social possibilities (BT:167; 345). It is that “everyday understanding of the world as publicly available” that “allows us to identify ourselves as individuals in the same world” (Carman 1994:218). This foundational role for intersubjectivity is by no means confined to Heidegger: for example, Husserl came to analyse objectivity in terms of “transcendental intersubjectivity” (Husserl 1964:344). But *Being and Time* is perhaps unique in the density of relations which it plots between self-awareness and agents. On the one hand, as noted, the latter articulates the framework – classrooms, books, universities in Sarah’s case, what Heidegger calls the “referential context of significance” – within which self-awareness plays out (BT:192). On the other hand, however, intersubjectivity threatens to distort our self-relationship by fostering “inauthenticity”. Heidegger here gives classic Enlightenment themes concerning the flight from epistemic responsibility an ontological twist: inauthentic agents are unwilling to face up to the true nature of their existence, in particular the finitude which characterises it and the absence of the normative certainty provided by God or by a categorical imperative (BT:231-5). For Heidegger, such inauthenticity is fundamentally a social phenomenon, defined by a conformist tendency to police, water down or simply ignore any individual’s attempts to challenge it (BT:165,435).

Heidegger’s account raises a huge range of issues, and I want here to note just two First, this account of self-awareness will be ineffective when it comes to aspects of the self not instrumentally ‘wired up’ in the right way. For example, there are many of my own mental states to which I seem to have special access, but which will not be manifest in the teleological networks that define the Heideggerian world: I believe and I know I believe that Lord North was once Prime Minister, but this obscure fact has never been “reflected back from the way [I] intend things in the course of acting unreflectively on [my] intentions”, as Okrent put it.[[33]](#footnote-33) Heidegger’s emphasis on the seamless inter-definition of self and world thus differs from other world-directed accounts of self-knowledge such as that in Evans’ famous example in which I answer a question as to my mental states – do I believe there will be another world war? – by considering various external facts (Russian armament rates etc): Evans’ model is mediated by a process of deliberation in response to an explicit question, whereas Heidegger’s intended precisely track a pre-thematic unity of self and world.[[34]](#footnote-34) Similarly, his account seems to skip over with what you might call brute sensory self-awareness: surely, prior to all this stuff about worlds and social roles, is such basic self-awareness as feeling pain? The natural Heideggerian response is to argue that these cases are explanatorily derivative. To even pose the question of my obscure belief about Lord North assumes a pre-existing world - perhaps that of “academic debate” – in terms of which it makes sense. “Brute sensations” he likewise dismisses as a philosophical conceit – pain is necessarily experienced against the backdrop a worldly context, just as we never simply hear ‘a sound’ but an engine or a fire or a radio (BT:207). But what exactly do these claims of derivative status amount to? Perhaps worldly experience comes first in a temporal or genetic claim or statistical sense – but does Heidegger mean more than that? And even if pain or my self-knowledge of the North case are secondary, some account of such self-awareness is needed: are Heideggerians simply to take over wholesale other views of such ‘derivative’ knowledge? If so, how are these accounts and their commitments to be integrated into the rest of his story? What, finally, about the links between our modes of self-awareness and that of non-human animals? Heidegger himself took an extremely hard line here, arguing for a radical distinction between our experience and theirs: this is the price of his dismissive treatment of what I called “brute” sensations, forms of self-awareness not mediated by the social meaning of a Heideggerian world.[[35]](#footnote-35) It is a price which reflects Phenomenology’s anti-naturalism, but one few contemporary philosophers will be willing to pay.

Second, more needs to be said about the underlying ideas of self-understanding, ‘know how’ and skills. For example, we saw above how Phenomeology criticised Kant’s judgement-based approach as overly intellectualist. But from a Kantian perspective, understanding myself as a carpenter is fundamentally a matter of making various judgements, of subsuming myself and other objects under concepts, and of taking for granted the causal stability guaranteed by the categories. The threat to Heidegger, in other words, is that “being-in-the-world” rather than being prior to the Kantian apparatus may in fact simply assume it. The Heideggerian response here would be to contest the collapse of his “understand as” locution into judgement – and perhaps the most natural way to do that is to align it with the embodied know how.[[36]](#footnote-36) That brings me to the final theory I want to address, Merleau-Ponty’s.

**(§3c) Merleau-Ponty on Embodied Action**

Merleau-Ponty’s model of self-awareness, as set out in his 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*, builds on several of the features we have seen above. First, as in both Heidegger and Sartre, he regards the basic phenomenon of self and world as a unity, from which distinction such as mind and body are explanatorily derivative abstractions.

The primary truth is indeed ‘I think’, but only provided that we understand thereby ‘I belong to myself’ while belonging to the world…Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself. (PP:474)

Second, again as in both Heidegger and Sartre, this form of self-awareness is considered distinct from and prior to the Cartesian cogito: it is a “silent cogito” that makes possible the type of reflective endeavour pursued by Descartes (PP:468). But what Merleau-Ponty presses further than any other thinker is the idea that this primary “presence to myself (*Urpräsenz*)” is an embodied one (PP:423).

Specifically, self-awareness is to be understood as an awareness of the exercise of bodily skills or “motor intentionality”. As I crane to get a better look at a picture on the gallery wall, I make an ongoing series of adjustments, adjustments experienced as bringing me nearer or further from a normative equilibrium: some are manifest as making my view better, others worse, a few as just right. I thus register and mange a constant succession of self-referential changes, changes in the relation between my position and the world around me: this is “felt as a lack of balance” as I seek the “best grip” [*meilleure prise*] on the world (PP:352). We need to be careful to separate what Merleau-Ponty has in mind from a merely egocentric perspective. O’Brien offers a helpful syntactic gloss on the latter:

Egocentric contents are…given by monadic notions such as ‘to the right’ and ‘up ahead’ in contrast to first-personal contents that are given by relational notions such ‘to the right of me’, ‘in front of me’.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The self-awareness Merleau-Ponty is discussing goes beyond such a merely egocentric standpoint: as in Heidegger, the right place to view the picture depends in part on how I understand myself – the ideal place for the novice to stand may differ from the critic which may differ from the restorer.

The basic form of self-consciousness for Merleau-Ponty is thus an awareness of myself in an embodied relation to perceived things. As he summarises:

[O]ur body is not the object of an ‘I think’: it is an ensemble of lived meanings that moves to its equilibrium. (PP:177)

We thus have an account which combines the Kantian focus on action with the anti-intellectualism seen in Sartre by appealing to what Merleau-Ponty calls the “body schema”, a way of organising experience which unlike Kant’s “transcendental schema” is not ultimately traceable to an act of the understanding.

Perhaps more even than Heidegger or Sartre, Merleau-Ponty’s theory of self-consciousness is hard to assess in separation from his larger metaphysics. But it faces some of the same difficulties as the other Phenomenological theories: for example, for those worried about the mind-body problem, the stipulation to begin from the unity of self and world has all the benefits of Russell’s “theft over honest toil”. Ironically, from Merleau-Ponty’s own later perspective the problem was rather that *Phenomenology of Perception* did not go far enough, hampered by a residual dualism.[[38]](#footnote-38) His view also faces particular difficulty in explicating and defending the key form of action, motor intentionality, on which it rests. As Merleau-Ponty is intensely aware, the threat is a binary reduction: either “motor intentionality” gets reduced to the space of causes, or it gets inflated to the space of reasons through the tacit positing of propositional content (PP*:*37). His aim in adducing cases such as Schneider, the disabled war veteran able to make fluid movements but not deliberate ones, was precisely to substantiate the claim that there are forms of content that resist either move (PP:118). In that sense, Merleau-Ponty’s position on self-consciousness is ultimately dependent upon his broader theory of content, on his broader phenomenology.

**Primary Text Abbreviations**

**BT** MartinHeidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J.Macquarrie and E.Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

**BN** Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H.Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

**CPR** Immanuel Kant,*Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P.Guyer and A.Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

**Cri** Edmund Husserl, The *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern U. P, 1970).

**PP** Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C.Smith (London: Routledge, 2005).

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1. Letter to Löwith, 8 May 1923 in Sheehan and Palmer, *Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger (1927-1931)* (London: Kluwer, 1997), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Husserl frequently makes the same point in terms of “objectivism” vs “transcendentalism” – see, for example, Cri:68-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana XVIII: Logische Untersuchungen Erster Band, Prolegomena zur reinen Logik*, (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975), §§17-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana X: Zur Phänomenologie Des Inneren Zeitbewusstseins (1893–1917)* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1966), §7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The details of both the Husserlian and Heideggerian accounts and of their divergence from Kant are complex. For an excellent overview, see William Blattner, *Heidegger’s Temporal Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press , 1999), 190-210. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Heidegger’s relationship to Husserl is particularly important here: for an excellent analysis see Carman, *Heidegger’s Analytic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Husserl, *Husserliana X*, 70; Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1997), 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana XIV: Zur Phänomenologie Der Intersubjektivität. Texte Aus Dem Nachlass. Zweiter Teil: 1921–1928* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (New York: Noonday Press, 1960), 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On the link between intuitions and objects see CPR:B146; I cannot address the broader issues raised by Kant’s idealism and its unknowable things in themselves here. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Johann Gottlieb Fichte. *Band I/4: Werke 1797–1798* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1970), 271-275. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Beatrice Longuenesse, “Kant’s “I Think” versus Descartes’ “I Am a Thing That Thinks” in *Kant and the Early Moderns* eds. Daniel Garber and Beatrice Longuenesse(Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hubert Dreyfus *Being-in-the-World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 95-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe 24*, 224-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For the Simms case, see Mark Wrathall, ‘Autonomy, Authenticity, and the Self’, in *Heidegger, Authenticity and the Self*, ed. D. McManus (London: Routledge, 2014), 195. For the Bird case, see Hubert Dreyfus ‘Heidegger’s Critique of the Husserl/Searle Account of Intentionality’, *Social Research* 60 (1993), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Manfred Frank, *Was Ist Neostrukturalismus*? (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For an especially clear example of this aspect of the position see Hubert Dreyfus, ‘Overcoming the Myth of the Mental’, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79 (2005), 47-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. There is an anachronism in projecting post-Fregean assumptions about the link between judgement and language back onto Kant, but for current purposes the simplification is harmless and it reflects the way Phenomenology saw things: for example, Heidegger frequently slides between *Aussage*, *Urteil*, and *Satz* (BT:§33) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert Louden, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15/127. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Alvin Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Princeton; N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 96. Uriah Kriegel, ‘Consciousness as Intransitive Self-Consciousness’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33 (2003), 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. David Rosenthal, ‘Two Concepts of Consciousness’, *Philosophical Studies* 49 (1986), 330.

    Matters are complicated by some of Sartre’s looser formulations: for a helpful treatment see Rocco Gennaro. ‘Jean-Paul Sartre and the HOT Theory of Consciousness’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 32 (2002), 293–330. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005), 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Zahavi, *Subjectivity*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Lynne Rudder Baker, *Persons and Bodies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe 61: Phänomenologische Interpretationen Zu Aristoteles* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1994), 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe 56/57: Zur Bestimmung Der Philosophie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1999), 71-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Steven Crowell, ‘Sorge or Selbstbewußtsein? Heidegger and Korsgaard on the Sources of Normativity’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 15 (2007), 321 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Mark Okrent, ‘Heidegger and Korsgaard on Human Reflection’, *Philosophical Topics* 27 (1999), 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Okrent, ‘Heidegger and Korsgaard on Human Reflection’, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 225. It is this reliance on a moment of disruption that Shah and Velleman call into question in their attack on Moran’s Evans-inspired account. See Nishi Shah and David Velleman, ‘Doxastic Deliberation’, *Philosophical Review*, 114 (2005), 506. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See, for example, *Gesamtausgabe 29/30: Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1983), 384, 397, 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The locus classicus is Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Lucy O’Brien, *Self-Knowing Agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)