# THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

It may seem that self-consciousness and intentionality pervade mental life in the following sense; either one or both of them constitute what it is to have a mind. Achieving an articulate understanding of the mental in terms of self-consciousness and intentionality presents an enormous challenge, part of which lies in figuring out how the two are related. Does one, in some sense, derive from or depend on the other, or are they quite independent and separate aspects of the mind?

This paper is intended as a limited contribution to the issue of the relation between intentionality and self-consciousness. Arguments will be presented, which aim to show that self-consciousness is essential to intentionality and the following points will be clarified and discussed:

The idea of intentionality is the idea of a subject *experiencing the world objectively.* Based on Strawson's analysis I myself intend to argue that a subject experiences the world objectively, if it employs *an objective point of view of the world,* such that allows it to have the following, double-featured awareness or understanding. On the one hand, when a system is said to experience the world, it has an understanding of itself as the subject of experience. On the other hand, when a system is said to experience the world, it has an understanding of objects as being independent from particular experiences thereof. This interdependence between the subjective and the objective aspect is explanatory of experience. One cannot give an explanation of experience without accounting for the two dimensions, our picture of the objective world and our picture of possible perceptual routes through it. This interdependence between the subjective and the objective is both explanatory of what it is to have a self (it is what is experienced in opposition to the world) and explanatory of what it is to be aware of the world (it is what is experienced in opposition to the self).

The proof of the argument about the objectivity of experience will be based on the notion of self-consciousness. In this case, self-consciousness will be shown to be a necessary condition for a subject's possessing a point of view. In particular, the requirement, which underlies the objectivity condition, is that experience should have a certain self-reflexive character, which allows a subject to ascribe experience to himself *as his experience.*

The aim of this essay is to concentrate on the non-conceptual level of ex-

perience. Just as there are ways of representing objects that do not require mastery of the relevant concepts, so there might be ways in which a creature's experience might incorporate the basic distinction between a self-conscious "subject" and an objectively known "object" as the heart of the notion of a point of view without a conceptual grasp of it. In this case, a creature employs a *non-conceptual point of view* if it can be aware of the distinction between its subjective experience and the object of that experience, without having conceptual mastery of the notions of "self" and "object".

The central impetus for focusing on the notion of non-conceptual content comes from the close dependence of the non-conceptual elements of cognition with action. At this level an account of experience can be canonically specified by the theorist's referring to the *abilities* of the organism. We may lump these together as the content's *embodiment* in the organism and its environment. In this context self-consciousness is understood as an embodied process, in which action and dispositions occupy a special place.

## I. Intentionality and the Notion of Point of View

Intentionality is a fundamental feature of the mental. A person cannot have any thoughts, experiences, beliefs and desires without those being directed towards, or simply *be about* other states of affairs in the world, some actual, some possible and some impossible. In this sense to think at all is to think *of* or be *about* something.

Etymologically the term *intentionality* derives from the Latin verb *intendo,* which means to point (to) or aim (at) or extend (towards). It was coined by the Scholastics in the Middle Ages for the purpose of marking the distinction between intentional or mental existence, such as that of a thought, or a mental image and natural existence, such as that of a tree or a rabbit. The Austrian philosopher Franz Brentano revived the term in the nineteenth century. Brentano's idea was that intentionality is the defining characteristic – *the mark* – of the mental. In his view, all and only mental states are intentional and, on that basis, intentionality is the distinguishing characteristic that *sets off* mental entities and the consequences of their cognitive capacities from the rest of natural systems in the world. Brentano's conception of intentionality as the "mind's aboutness" was adopted by the majority of philosophers of mind and has dominated current philosophical discussion about the mental ever since. It is a term that is used in order to denote the fact that our states of mind are *directed towards* or *point to* other things in the world. Thus, one cannot explain what is particular about the mental, without accounting for its respective directedness to a particular state of affairs in the world it is *of* or *about.*

Although it may seem to be something very fundamental to the nature of mind, that our thoughts are about other things in the world or "point beyond

themselves", still a coherent and satisfactory theoretical grasp of this phenomenon of "mental pointing" is difficult to achieve for a number of reasons. For one, identifying intentionality with *aboutness* nicely locates the concept, but hardly clarifies it, for the ordinary meaning of the phrase "being about *x*" is general, equivocal, vague and, thus, perplexing on its own. Most importantly, the relevant use of the term is tangled up with some rather involved philosophical history. Philosophers have prior beliefs about the kinds of entities that intentionality applies to. These beliefs inform and, most of the times, predispose the type of explanation given with regards to the nature of the phenomenon. As a result, different philosophical approaches ascribe intentionality to systems of varying levels of complexity of behaviour, on the basis of different criteria of aboutness attribution. Such diversity of views concerning the definition of the term renders difficult the existence of a common and uncontroversial framework for theoretical discussion of intentionality. For the above reasons, it is necessary, at this point, to provide a further specification of the notion of intentionality, based on the premise that the aim of this paper is to concentrate on the semantic or personal level of explanation of the mental.

At the semantic or personal level of explanation – the level where one explains the behavior of an organism in terms of intentional states, like perceptions, experiences, beliefs, memories, etc. – the characteristic aboutness of the mental consists in the ability of a system to have *an objective access to the world.* At this level, to say that a creature is intentionally related to the world means that it can be considered as a non-solipsistic entity, an entity that has the ability to *experience the world objectively.*

It is important to note that the notion of objectivity which is of our concern is not defined as objective truth, where objective truth is the outcome of interpersonal agreement. Neither do we view objectivity as a condition for the epistemological significance of a theory, according to which a theory has objective significance, if it comprises propositions whose truth is something which does not depend on the subject's perceptual capacities. Rather we are interested to offer an account of the *objectivity of experience,* which remains true even if the associated perceptual judgement is false.

This type of objectivity becomes evident in cases of error or misrepresentation, where subjects relate intentional states (perceptions, beliefs, etc.) to objects that do not exist. Notice for example, an instance of a person tokening a perceptual belief about *a cat* in the presence of, say, a Pekinese dog. What is particular of this non-veridical belief is that it is produced in the absence of the conditions it nevertheless is about. However, there exists a very important similarity between this person's veridical and non-veridical beliefs about *a cat.* The similarity is that in both situations the subject is experiencing the word objectively, that is, he has awareness of objects

(i.e., cats) as if they exist independently of being thought about, regardless of whether his beliefs are right or wrong.

Intentional states tokened at the personal level (thoughts, beliefs, memories, perceptions, etc.), whether they are veridical or not, specify particular types of objects, properties and relations *as objects per se* (objects as they really are, or objects in themselves). Thus, objects are those independently existing items to which one's sensible experience is due and which exist independently of whatever experiential state a subject may be in. Subjects of experience can recognize objects as independent entities, when they understand their experience as being *of* something, which is distinct from the experience itself. They do not simply describe those entities in virtue of their role in causing perceptual states of a certain kind. Rather, they refer to them as being independent of their experience (perception, memory, thought, etc.) of them. Thus, to say that thoughts or experiences are about objects, properties and events which are objective is to say that their nature (or essential character) is independent of any one person's actions, dispositions or mental phenomena[1].

To recapitulate, the idea of intentionality, which is of concern in this paper, is the idea of a subject being objectively related to the world. This objectivity is defined as the ability of a subject to conceive of *existence unperceived,* or else the ability to recognize the existence of an outer world. This is a requirement for the other "versions" of objectivity to be, even in principle, possible.

It is at this point that Strawson's notion of *point of view* comes in hand. Strawson, in the context of his discussion of Kant's *Transcendental Deduction* in his 1966 book *The Bounds of Sense,* argues for the necessity of a subject's having *a point of view* as a condition for the objectivity of its experience. Strawson argues that a condition of an entity's having an objective point of view is that it can experience the metaphysical distance between "subject" and "object"; namely between the order of its experiences and the order of the objects of its experience. Experiencing the world, he claims, means having a point of view, such that "the experiences of a subject must themselves be so conceptualised as to determine a distinction between the subjective route of his experiences and the objective world through which it is a route"[2]. In other words, to be objectively related to the world means to have some form of awareness of objects of experience understood as being

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1. Cf. T. BURGE, Cartesian Error and the Objectivity of Perception, in P. PETTIT & J. McDOWELL (eds.), *Subject, Thought and Context,* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 125.
2. P. F. STRAWSON, *The Bounds of Sense,* London, Methuen & Co. LTD, 1966, p. 104.

distinct from particular subjective states of experience of them. Two things should be noted here:

First, Strawson's notion of point of view intends to draw together what could otherwise be considered as two distinct sets of conceptual capacities: the one is the capacity to *build an objective picture* of the world, in which objects and properties are presented as independent of any particular experience of them; the other is the capacity to *self-ascribe the experience* of objects. By having such a point of view, the subject is eventually able to yield a picture of a unified objective world, along with its ability to experience a single, subjective, experiential route of the world. Consequently, according to Strawson, objectivity and subjectivity go hand-in-hand.

Second, Strawson's notion of point of view describes some form of *recognition* or *understanding:* to have a point of view is to *be aware of* the metaphysical distance between "subject" and "object". Reading through his text, it becomes apparent that a person's point of view is not a matter of having two distinct types of abilities. On the contrary, it is a matter of a single ability to draw a certain very basic distinction. Experience reflecting a point of view is experience that permits the right sort of distinctions to be drawn between a subject's experiences and the objects of which they are experiences.

## 2. Unity of Experience and the Role of Self-Consciousness

As already advertised in the previous section, the notion of intentionality that will be of interest in this paper is defined as a subject's ability to *experience the world objectively.* In order to provide a theoretical grounding to the notion of objectivity, we presented Strawson's (1966) discussion of Kant's transcendental deduction of categories as a philosophical point of departure. Strawson argued that a subject experiences the world objectively if it employs *an objective point of view of the world,* such that allows it to have some form of awareness of *existence unperceived.* He defined awareness of existence unperceived as a subject's experience of *the independence* of the existence of a particular perceptual phenomenon from its particular perceptual properties.

Such awareness of the possibility of existence unperceived can be incorporated in the experience of any creature that has a *grasp* of the fact that a particular experienced phenomenon *continues* to exist, independently of the subject's experiencing of it. That is, continuity of existence unperceived should be obvious even in cases of interrupted observation. In view of the above chain of thought, one could say that experiencing existence unperceived means *understanding the continuous nature* of the existence of a particular phenomenon. Now, the important question arising out of this claim

seems to be *what form must experience take if it is to incorporate that, what is being experienced at the present moment, has an existence transcending the present moment?*

The aim of this section is to examine briefly the arguments that Strawson develops, in order to answer this question. The reason for choosing to focus on his line of reasoning is that he bases the proof of the argument about the continuous nature of existence unperceived (and ultimately, about the objectivity of experience) on the notion of self-consciousness. Thus, as it will be shown in this section, Strawson's notion of point of view rests on the notion of self-consciousness.

One type of application of a subject's recognising the continuity of existence of a particular phenomenon from his particular experience of it is expressed in situations of *discontinuity of observation.* In *Individuals,* Strawson observes that the concept of an objective world (the idea of existence unperceived) cannot have any application in the experience of a subject, unless that experience provides him with the ability to recognise the existence of particulars, through intervals during which they are not being observed[3]. The ability of awareness of existence unperceived should allow for discontinuities and limits of observation, like cases where a person's field of observation of a particular thing in his environment is limited, or cases where he continuously changes position relative to that thing, or cases where he cannot observe a particular entity continuously. To give a more specific example of a subject's understanding the continuous nature of existence unperceived, one should think of someone employing the thought "it is raining". A subject that employs this thought has a basic form of awareness of the continuity of rain; namely, that it may continue to rain after he gets into the building and cannot see nor hear that it's raining. Also, the subject is aware that it may rain continuously between the time he falls asleep and the time he awakes. Because of the limits of observation of experiencing subjects, an account of understanding the unperceived existence must lean heavily on "qualitative recurrences", that is, on the fact that experiencing subjects have repeated observational encounters with the same patterns of arrangements of objects.

How is it possible, then, that phenomena, of the same kind as those of which one has experience, be conceived as continuing to exist when they are not being experienced? Such phenomena are evidently perceptible. We are aware of their existence through our sensible representations of them. To be able to understand how we can conceive them as objects existing outside our

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3. P. F. STRAWSON, *Individuals*, London, Methuen & Co., 1959, p. 32.

power to represent them, some rudimentary theory of perception is required, which can account for a subject's ability to experience the fact that the existence of an object lies entirely outside his experience of it[4].

Strawson puts forward his own account of perception, according to which the only way one can make sense of the possibility of a subject's awareness of the continuous existence of objects is in virtue of the *unity of its experience*. He says, «if any phase of experience is to count as a phase of experience of the objective, we must be able to integrate it with other phases as part of a single unified experience of a single objective world»[5]. Each particular experience is a member of a series of other previous experiences, which collectively build up and constitute a single, subjective, experiential route. The unified, single stream of subjective experience contains the substitute for awareness of the real, independently existing, object in the rule-governed connectedness of the experiences. In this case, objects are rules governing the connection of experiences. What is of most importance to Strawson's analysis of the employment of ordinary empirical concepts of the world is that the conception of objects, as existing in an order and arrangement of their own, *depends on* the order and arrangement of a subject's experiences of awareness of them. In other words, it is in virtue of the rule-governed connectedness of experiences that subjects are able to employ concepts of empirical objects, conceived as existing independently of the order and the nature of the subject's experiences of them. As Strawson says, «experience contains such a ground for it in that connectedness which makes possible the employment of ordinary empirical concepts of objects conceived of as together forming a unified natural world, with its own order, [is] distinct from and controlling the subjective order of perceptions»[6].

The problem with Strawson's argument so far is that, although it purports to explain a subject's ability to conceive of objects in virtue of its possessing a unified stream of perceptions, it contains however no ground for the distinction to be even possible. To see how this is the case, consider the following. There exist particular subjective experiences (e.g., momentary tickling sensations, pains, etc.), whose objects of experience cannot be conceived as having an existence, which is independent of particular experiences of them. Still however, each of those successive "experiences" belongs to a single unified subjective stream. Strawson's argument so far has not explained why it is not the case that all of our experience is of this sort.

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4. Cf. G. EVANS, Things Without the Mind: A Commentary upon Chapter Two of Strawson's *Individuals*, in Z. VAN STRAATEN (ed.), *Philosophical Subjects: Essays Presented to P. F. Strawson*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 88.

5. STRAWSON, 1966, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 90.

Acknowledging this problem, Strawson asks the reader to imagine the case of a solipsistic subject that simply has a purely sense-datum experience[7] of the following sort; a solipsistic subject would experience only sensory qualities like red round patches, brown oblongs, flashes, whistles, tickling sensations, aching sensations, etc. Thus, its experience would simply be a collection of sensory incidents through time. It could be a sort of essentially disconnected impressions, where these cannot be attributed to an object, because the "esse" (the being) of the putative objects of experience would be their *percepta* (perceptions). In this imaginary situation, the objects of awareness of such an experience would be a succession of items, such that no distinction could be drawn between the order and arrangement of the objects and the order and arrangement of the subject's experiences of them.

The very minimum that is missing from the hypothesis of the purely sense-datum experience is *the recognitional component of experience*. There can be no experience at all which does not involve the recognition of a particular item *as* being of a particular kind. Consider the character of those ordinary concepts of objects on the employment of which our lives, our transactions with each other and the world depend. In using these terms, we certainly intend to be talking of independent existences and we certainly intend to be talking of immediately perceptible things, which are bearers of phenomenal properties. What is thus *seen as* a real thing, existing independently of being perceived, is also *seen as* coloured – as possessing visual qualities. What is *felt as* a real thing is also felt as hard or soft, smooth or rough-surfaced – as possessing tactile qualities. What we ordinarily take ourselves to be aware of in perception are the physical things themselves. This does not mean that we have a difficulty in distinguishing between our experiences of seeing, hearing and feeling objects and the objects themselves. In the hypothetical sense-datum experience, however, it is not possible to distinguish a component of recognition or judgement, which is not simply identical or wholly absorbed by the particular item, which is recognized. This, according to Strawson, effectively means that we cannot talk either about objects of experience nor about subjective experiences, and hence we cannot talk about objectivity at all.

What is it that explains the objectivity of our experience and, in consequence, refutes the possibility of our experience being the solipsistic type described above? Strawson's answer is that the possibility of any form of experience is inextricably bound up with the question of the possibility of *self-conscious experience*. For that reason, Strawson characterises his project as

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7. By definition a solipsistic creature cannot be attributed any experience, neither can it be considered as a subject of experience, but here those notions are used for ease of exposition of the imaginary case.

an attempt to provide an elaboration of the conditions for a «non-solipsistic consciousness»[8], conditions that would explain how experience could be *about* something distinct from the experience itself.

The way out of this problem is to acknowledge that the recognitional component necessary to experience can be present, only because of the possibility of referring different experiences to one identical subject of them. Strawson observes that the recognitional component in experience implies «the potential acknowledgement of the experience into which recognition necessarily enters as being one's own, as sharing with others this relation to the identical self»[9]. In other words, a subject's awareness of its ability to experience the world depends on the possibility of self-consciousness on the part of the subject of those experiences. The possibility of self-consciousness in general is bound up with the possibility of self-ascription of experience. What is meant by the necessary self-reflexiveness of a possible experience can be expressed otherwise, by saying that experience must be such as to provide room for the thought of the experience itself. It is the fact that this potentiality is implicit in our experience of the world, which saves the recognitional component in a particular experience from absorption into the item recognized (even when that item cannot be conceived of as having an existence independent of the particular experience of it).

To recapitulate, Strawson argues that a condition for the objectivity of experience is that it contains a basis for the distinction between the subjective order of experiences, on the one hand, and the objective order of the objects of which they are experiences, on the other. The basis for this distinction is the possibility of self-consciousness. In particular, the requirement which underlies the objectivity condition is that experience should have a certain self-reflexive character, that allows a subject to ascribe experience to himself *as his experience*.

## 3. Request for a Non-conceptual Point of View and the Importance of Action

Strawson's conceptualisation of an objective point of view as awareness of the metaphysical distance between "subjective experience" and "existence unperceived" presupposes thinkers bearing what are traditionally considered as *conceptual* elements of cognition[10]. As Strawson understands the

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8. He says: «... I shall mean by a non-solipsistic consciousness, the consciousness of a being who has a use for the distinction between himself and his states on the one hand, and something not himself, or a state of himself, of which he has experience on the other». [STRAWSON, 1959, *op. cit.*, p. 69].

9. *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

10. The notion of conceptual at work in the philosophical literature can be elucidated with

matter, experience reflecting an objective point of view is available only to creatures that can grasp the distinction between a subjective/first-person and an objective/third-person perspective, in virtue of the concepts they possess. Furthermore, a subjects' possession of a fully developed conceptual scheme supports a number of structured reasoning abilities.

Strawson's conceptualisation of the grasp of the metaphysical distance between "subject" and "object" presupposes thinkers that come equipped with a ready-made, clear-cut distinction between self and the world. On the one hand, individuals possessing the concept of "self" master the sophisticated skills that allow them to self-ascribe their experiences, to consciously introspect their selves as being the bearer of those experiences and to have a direct, private access to the content of their thoughts. On the other hand, individuals that are aware of objects, in virtue of the possession of a conceptual scheme, are able to employ multiple perspectives of the same object, to generalize systematically, to quantify and make context-independent inferences about objects and their relations. What is more, they have the ability to employ a third-person, detached perspective of oneself as one object in the world among others.

However, there seems to be an important class of experiential psychological states and systems, the full understanding of which employs a notion of content that does not necessarily require a fully developed conceptual way of representing the world. This class of *experiential, proto-objective phenomena* includes animal learning and cognition, proto-cognition in infants, real-time perception and action-integration. Those kinds of psychological states can be grouped under the label of *non-conceptual elements of cognition,* as a way to be contrasted to the *conceptual elements* of cognition of fully developed thinkers. These non-conceptual elements of cognition do not require that the bearers of those mental states possess any concepts. Rather,

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reference to current work on intentionality and, in particular, representational content, since often it is assumed that to have intentionality is to have representational content. The notion of representational content has been particularly central to the analytic tradition derived from the study of Frege and Russell. It is a theoretical tool employed, in order to get a hold on intentionality. A representational content is a presentation (or re-presentation) of the world of experience in thought. Thus, to say that a mental state has content is just to say that it represents the world as being a certain way. The problem that emerges for the theorist of content is how to canonically specify the nature of different contents carried by different representations. The dominant view among philosophers of intentional content has been that the ways in which a creature can represent the world are determined by its conceptual capacities, since concepts are literally the constituents of thoughts, beliefs, desires, etc. So, when someone believes that the sun is shining, his belief-state is literally composed of the concepts *sun* and *shining.* In other words, one cannot token a belief that the sun is shining, unless he is in a state with content that involves the concepts *sun* and *shining.*

as several philosophers of mind have argued[11], the representational properties of these non-conceptual elements of cognition can be specified in virtue of the notion of non-conceptual content.

To offer a detailed analysis of non-conceptual content is beyond the objectives of this paper. The general thought, though, is that non-conceptual content can be attributed to a creature, without thereby attributing to that creature mastery of the concepts required to specify that content. A theory of non-conceptual content is representational. If a given perceptual experience *x* is described as having a nonconceptual content *x*, this means that the experience represents *x* as holding in the world and being in a certain way. The difference between the representational properties of conceptual and nonconceptual content is best exhibited in cases of perceptual experience. Perceptual experiences represent the world in a way, which is fundamentally different from those in which perceptual beliefs do. Optical illusions are a case in point. Knowing that one is witnessing a perceptual illusion does not make the illusion go away, even though one is aware that it represents the world as being a way, which it cannot be. It is a well-known fact about the Müller-Lyer illusion, for example, that it will continue to appear to us that one line is longer than the other, even though we are sure that this is not the case. What the contrast between our experience of optical illusions and our beliefs about them shows, is that the richness and grain of perceptual experience cannot be constrained nor captured by the concepts that a perceiver might possess. To recapitulate, perceptual experience has a non-conceptual component, which is nonetheless representational, but which is richer and finer-grained, in order to capture aspects of the world that the conceptual component of our thoughts is often unable to capture. As a result, a principled distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual content should be imposed.

The central impetus for focusing on the notion of non-conceptual content, however, comes from the close dependence of the non-conceptual elements of cognition with action.

Adrian Cussins is one of the theorists that introduced the notion of non-conceptual content. Cussins offers an account in which the contents of perceptual experience can be canonically specified by the theorist's referring to the *abilities* of the organism, to «certain fundamental skills which the organism possesses, like the ability to keep track of an object in a visual array, or to follow an instrument in a complex and devolving pattern of

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11. Cf. G. EVANS, *The Varieties of Reference*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982; C. PEACOCKE, *A Study of Concepts*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1992.

sound»[12]. For example, what does a subject's perceiving a coffee mug consist in? Cussins' idea is that the subject sees the mug as graspable, as locatable, as being such as to resist manual-pressure, as being drinkable from... The subject has a range of abilities, skills, dispositions and mechanisms, in virtue of which it is able to grasp the content. This range will include sensory and effector mechanisms which are sensitive to and can store and access information from the mug, like, for example, information about the mug's weight, colour and position. It will include skills to act directly on the mug and to behave appropriately with respect to it. We may lump these together as the content's *embodiment* in the organism and its environment.

Cussins claims that the content of perceptual experience can be canonically specified as a complex disposition of some sort. In this case, he argues, this disposition is directly available to that subject in his or her experience, even though it may not be available to the subject conceptually (the subject may be incapable of expressing in words what its experience is about)[13]. These abilities are not available to the subject as descriptive conditions of the world. They are rather available to the subject as its experience-based knowledge of how to act on the object and respond to it. For example, the cognitive significance of the perception of the mug being full can be captured by the theorist's referring to abilities to grasp the mug or otherwise to locate it, to track the mug through space and time, and to be selectively sensitive (in action and memory) to changes in the mug's features.

What is important in our case is that specification of non-conceptual content by reference to the notion of embodiment does not presuppose a conceptual grasp of the distinction between a self-conscious "subject" and context-independent "object". At the level of conceptual content, an objective world is given to a subject, if the content possessed by the subject presents something as being independent of the subject's particular abilities and particular location in space and time. At the level of perceptual experience, however, all that the subject has is an experiential awareness of how to move, to act, etc., in response to local changes in its environment. This sort of awareness presents things as being *dependent* on the contingent characteristics of the subject itself, because they are available only to the experiencing organism while it is in the process of enjoying this experience. In other words, the perceptual object is necessarily local and context-dependent. What is more, at the non-conceptual level of experience there is no clear distinction between the experiencing subject and the object of experience, be-

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12. A. CUSSINS, The Connectionist Construction of Concepts, in M. A. BODEN (ed.), *The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 396.

13. *Op. cit.*, p. 395.

cause there is no basis for the experient to think of itself neither as one element amongst others in the objective world, nor as the conscious bearer of its experience.

Based on the above reasoning, according to which at the level of perceptual experience there is no clear-cut, conceptual distinction between "subject" and "object", one could draw the conclusion that no point of view can be attributed to the experiencing subject. The aim of this paper, however, is to argue that this is not the case. In view of the existence of experiential but non-conceptual elements of cognition and their close relation to action, the aim of this paper is to provide an account of a proto-objective notion of point of view (understanding the metaphysical distance between "subject" and "object"), which does not come equipped with a ready-made conceptual distinction between self and the world. Rather, it explains what it is for this distinction to arise in experience, or, in other words, it accounts for the non-miraculous appearance of the subject/object distinction.

In particular, the scope of the paper is to follow Strawson's account of objectivity as *awareness* of the metaphysical distance between "subject" and "object" only halfway. In the absence of the sort of conceptual skills that Strawson takes to be necessary for a subject to employ a point of view, one is left with the need to explain the emergence of objectivity, without the prior use of concepts. In other words, one is in need to provide an account of a primitive form of grasp of that metaphysical distance between experience and the object of experience, which is basic enough to ground ascription of objectivity to systems not exhibiting the full-blown conceptual capacities responsible for the objective viewpoint of the world that humans have.

In the rest of the paper, we will keep the essential thrust of Strawson's position and reformulate it as follows: we will argue that there are systems which experience the world by means of *being aware of* a kind of proto-metaphysical distance between "subject" and "object", a distance that does not presuppose a clear mind/world distinction. Just as there are ways of representing objects that do not require mastery of the relevant concepts, so there might be ways, in which a creature's experience might incorporate the basic distinction at the heart of the notion of a point of view without a conceptual grasp of it. Because this formulation tries to sidestep any demand for sophisticated concept mastery, we can term it the *non-conceptual point of view*. In this case, a creature's experience reflects a non-conceptual point of view, if it can be *aware* of the metaphysical distance between *perceptum* and *esse*, without having conceptual mastery of the notions of "self" and "object".

## 4. The Ecological View of Perception

To explore the implications of this suggestion we will start with J. J. Gibson's account of *ecological perception*, as this is developed in his book *The*

*Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979). One of the attractions of the Gibsonian concept of ecological perception is that it seems to have the resources that can provide an understanding of the features that a basic form of objectivity must incorporate, its main advantage being that it does not require any conceptual baggage, in order to explain how there can be a basic form of recognition of self and the world. In other words, ecological perception can serve as a core for a more comprehensive account of the notion of an objective point of view.

It should be noted that ecological perception falls a long way short of fully-fledged self-consciousness or objectivity. As it will be shown in the rest of this section, there is a crucial difference between having information about oneself as part of one's ecological experience and being fully self-conscious, where fully fledged self-consciousness is taken to involve the capacity to entertain "I" thoughts or to maintain some form of detached perspective on oneself. On the same lines, there is a major difference between receiving perceptual information about the environment and conceptualising the world as a spatial and causally structured system of mind-independent objects. Neither of these two sophisticated conceptual capacities is required for ecological perception to take place. On Gibson's ecological understanding, all perception involves co-perception of self and environment, because a form of sensitivity to self-specifying information is built into the very structure of perception of the world. This self/world distinction is primitive enough not to depend on a more basic form, so that regress can be avoided. Furthermore, it is able to explain what it is for a subject/object distinction to arise in experience. To see how this is the case we will proceed in the following analysis:

It is instructive to view the Gibsonian theory of ecological perception as challenging the traditional strict distinction between the five senses, which are directed "outwards", and what is known as the "body sense", which is a form of perception "from within". The former have the function of providing information about objects in the environment, while the latter is designed to yield proprioceptive information, mainly about bodily posture and movement. According to this traditional view of perception, the self cannot appear in the content of any ordinary, outwardly directed perception. Gibson, however, rejects this traditional division of labour between the five exteroceptive senses and the proprioceptive body sense, arguing that all perceptual systems are proprioceptive as well as exteroceptive, because they all pick up information both about the self and the environment. Furthermore, Gibson argues, the self is phenomenologically salient in the content of perceptual experience, because «information that is specific to the self is picked up as such, no matter what sensory nerve is delivering impulses to the brain»[14].

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14. J. J. GIBSON, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1979, p. 115.

Gibson's analysis of perception as an interplay of self-specifying and other-specifying invariants provides evidence of a primitive form of self-world distinction implicated in the basic mechanisms of perception and action. Perhaps the most basic form of this duality of ecological perception of self and the world arises through the way the self becomes manifest in visual perception, in virtue of the self-specifying information that is an integral part of visual experience. As Gibson stresses, every animal has a field of view[15] which is bounded by its body. This fact poses certain peculiarities on the phenomenology of the field of vision. First, vision reveals only a portion of the environment to the perceiver at any given time. This portion is unique to that perceiver, and depends on the way his body blocks out aspects of the environment. Most importantly, the boundedness of the field of vision is part of what is seen by the perceiver. The self is actually present in visual perception as the frame of the field of view, as what surrounds and gives it structure. In effect, a creature's awareness of the limits of its body gives rise to a clear and phenomenologically very salient distinction between bodily and non-bodily physical objects. In this limited but important sense, the perceived body becomes the limit between self and non-self. This is the first element of self-world dualism that ecological perception provides.

One of Gibson's central complaints against traditional theories of perception is that they fail to accommodate the fact that perception is an active process that involves movement and takes place over time. It is only in the experimental laboratory that cognition takes place from a fixed spatial point. In realistic situations, however, creatures move through the world, retaining continuity through change. The real challenge of any theory of perception is to understand the way a constantly changing pattern of environmental stimulations, generated by the animal's continuous motion in the world, yields constant perceptions.

It is in Gibson's theory of affordances that we find the most sustained development of the ecological view that the fundamentals of perceptual experience are dictated by the organism's need to navigate and act in its environment, and so that the organism and the environment are complementary. At the ecological level of perception a creature has the ability to perceive a class of higher-order invariants that Gibson terms *affordances*. The notion of affordance was introduced by Gibson, in order to describe *what* it is that an animal perceives and *how*. The affordances of the environment are for a given creature what it *offers* that creature, what it *furnishes* or *provides*. Affordances are relations of possibilities between actors and envi-

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15. A field of view is the solid angle of light that the eyes can register.

ronments. At any given moment the environment affords a host of possibilities: a relatively flat, horizontal rigid and sufficiently extended surface, for example, affords locomotion for many animals. It is "stand-on-able", permitting an upright posture for quadrupeds and bipeds. It is, therefore, also "walk-on-able" and "run-on-able". A non-rigid surface, like the surface of a lake, however, does not afford support or easy locomotion for medium sized mammals, but it offers these things for smaller bugs. Perception of affordances is relative to the perceiving subject, so that the same features in the environment have different affordances for different processes (nutrition, locomotion, etc.) and for different organisms in the environment.

The importance of Gibson's idea is that affordances are not learned through experience nor they are inferred. They are directly perceived as higher order invariants. His thesis is that it can be a feature of the ambient light itself that, for instance, something "looks edible" or "looks dangerous". Information specifying affordances is available in the structure of light to be picked up by the creature as it moves around in the world. For example, a creature that looks around for shelter is not responsive to physical properties of light, like colour and brightness, but rather to visible features of the environment that matter to it. A creature that searches for food is not responsible to physical properties in its habitat, like colour, shape or smell, but rather to edible features in its habitat that matter to it. In other words, since from the point of view of survival, what is of immediate importance to an organism is not so much the particular objects in its environment but the affordances *of* its environment, that is, what the system perceives. Gibson calls such abstract environmental features *high-order invariants*, where these «are related at one extreme to the motives and needs of the observer and at the other extreme to the substances and surfaces of a world»[16].

The picture that emerges from the analysis of Gibson's ecological theory of affordances shows another way that ecological perception provides a creature with a primitive awareness of the distinction between self and the world. This distinction is operative in the very structure of perception. The world that manifests itself in ecological perception is primitive, in comparison to the causally structured world of physical objects. On the ecological level, perceiving the world means being in the process of extracting invariants, even if these are higher-order invariants, related to the needs of particular organisms. An important point to bear in mind is that affordances are properties that objects and surfaces have relative to the organisms that perceive them, or at least could perceive them. They are not properties of the perceiving organisms. Still, however, one could attribute a kind of self-aware-

16. *Op. cit.*, p. 143.

ness in virtue of the self-specifying information that is co-perceived with information about the environment.

## 5. The Temporal Dimensions of a Point of View

The picture that emerged from the previous discussion is that ecological perception supports a self/world distinction, which is primitive enough not to depend on a more basic form. The reason for presenting the Gibsonian account was to see whether this distinction is basic enough to ground a non-conceptual point of view.

The aim of the present section is to argue that ecological co-perception of self and environment cannot account for the objectivity of experience that reflects a non-conceptual point of view. The distinction between self and non-self that is present in ecological perception is not equivalent with the awareness of the distance between experience and what it is an experience of, despite the fact that both distinctions would appear to qualify as instances of a subject's possessing a point of view. A creature who, in virtue of ecological perception, has a grasp of the boundaries and limits of the self, and, hence, of the distinction between self and other, can be described as having a use for the distinction between himself and his states on the one hand, and something not himself, or a state of himself, on the other. The same holds for a creature, which grasps the distinction between experience and its object. It would be a mistake, however, to infer that awareness of the former distinction explains how awareness of the latter is possible. In other words, the minimal registering of the distinction between self and non-self *cannot explain* a creature's ability to experience the metaphysical distance between experience and the object of experience. As a result, the materials offered by Gibson's account need to be supplemented, if they are to be employed in the theoretical project under discussion.

In the previous sections, the notion of a non-conceptual point of view was defined as a subject's ability to distinguish between its *subjective experience* and *the object of that experience*, without having conceptual mastery of the notions of "self" and "object". Following Strawson's line of argumentation, we claimed that a system can be said to experience the world, if it has the ability to distinguish between two parallel and closely dependent routes of interpretation of the incoming environmental stimuli: the one line of interpretation involves "a subjective route", and the other line of interpretation involves "an objective route". To be able to make such a distinction, one should have awareness of the *continuity of existence unperceived*, that is, he should be aware of the fact that what is being experienced exists independently of any particular experience of it. To be aware of an independent existence itself involves understanding that, what is being experienced at the

moment, either has existed in the past, or will exist in the future. In other words, awareness of existence unperceived requires some form of *temporal awareness*. Consider an act of recognizing a particular object. Because such an act involves drawing a connection between one's current experience of an object and a previous experience of it, it brings with it an awareness that what is being experienced has an existence transcending the present moment. A creature whose experience takes place completely within a continuous present (i. e., who lacks any sense of past or future) will not be capable of drawing the fundamental non-solipsistic distinction between its experience and what it is an experience of.

The question that arises at this point is whether ecological perception involves any form of temporal understanding. To see if this is the case, we need to consider a realistic, ecological situation. Bermudez, in his article *Ecological Perception and the Notion of a Nonconceptual Point of View* (1995), describes a situation which involves a swallow performing complicated feats of navigation, that involve finding its way back to its nest or back to the warmer climes where it spends the winter. To explain the success of its performance, Bermudez argues, one could attribute to it sensitivity to certain facts about its route (facts, for example, about how to get from one place to another and then back to where it started from). Bermudez argues that information about the spatio-temporal route that the creature is taking through the world is particularly apparent in the creature's perception of itself moving through the world. He says «one has, it might seem, a continuous awareness of oneself taking a particular route through the world that does not require the exercise of any conceptual capacities, in virtue of having a constant flow of information about oneself *qua* physical object moving through the world. As such, it has the self-world distinction built in its perceptual apparatus»[17]. Could such a creature have experience reflecting a temporally extended point of view of the world?

As it has already been defined, a creature has a point of view when it is able to be aware of existence unperceived, hence to be able to recognise that what is being experienced at the particular moment has an existence transcending the present moment. To be able to make this distinction the creature must have some sort of recognitional capacities, which offer the right sort of escape from the continuous present by being exercised on something extraneous to the experiences themselves. In the example given, however, this is not possible. The swallow cannot recognise the places and features that it

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17. J. L. BERMUDEZ, Ecological Perception and the Notion of a Nonconceptual Point of View, in J. L. BERMUDEZ, A. MARCEL and N. EILAN (eds.), *The Body and the Self*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1995, p. 159.

repeatedly encounters. The distinction between self and non-self, that is available to the animal in virtue of its ecological perception, is purely synchronic. It does not require taking into account times other than the present, unlike the distinction between experience and what is an experience of. In effect, because of the atemporal character of ecological perception, the creature of our example is not able to recognise that its experience is about something distinct from itself, because it is not able to recognise a component of its experience that transcends the present moment.

This important question, that arises is what form experience must take if it is to incorporate awareness that the object of experience has a trans-temporal existence.

To answer this question, we can follow Bermudez[18] into drawing a distinction between two types of instances. There are, on the one hand, instances in which past experiences influence present experience, but in which the subject has no sense or awareness of having had those past experiences. On the other hand, there are instances in which past experiences influence present experience *and* in which the subject is in some sense aware of having had those past experiences. When we apply this distinction to the matter at hand, we can infer that it is only the latter case that licenses talk of a notion of point of view, as distinction between the subjective route of one's experiences and the world through which it is a route. This is so for the following reasons:

Ecological perception does not involve anything like a point of view built into the structure of perception, because it does not involve anything like conscious recognition. On the ecological view, perception is fundamentally a process of extracting and abstracting invariants from the flowing optical array. The key to how that information is picked up is the idea of direct perception. Gibson accepts that present experiences are partly a function of past experiences, but without any sense that the subject is aware of having had the relevant past experience. Gibson rejects that this sensitivity to past experience is generated in virtue of any form of conscious registration, or of various other cognitive processes employed to organise incoming environmental information (sensations). His ecological account rests on the idea that the senses become more sensitive over time to particular forms of information as a function of prior exposure. One should reflect on the case of the swallow described before; while it is able to perform feats of navigation, like finding its way back to its nest, it is not conscious, in any sense, of having repeatedly encountered that particular place. Such a creature is clearly

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18. Cf. J. L. BERMUDEZ, *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1998, p. 174.

sensitive to certain facts about the place in question and it is also possible that its present experience has been causally affected by its previous encounters with the same place. In other words, the swallow's ability to recognize its nest is a function of prior exposure to that stimulus. As a result, conscious recognition *is not* implicated in ecological perception, although it might or might not develop out of such ecological perception.

But the situation becomes fundamentally different if we consider the situation of a creature that can consciously recognize an object or a place. To consciously recognize an object is to be aware of having encountered that object or place before. A creature, which can register a past experience of that object as its own past experience has the beginnings of a temporal awareness, or as Strawson describes it, awareness of the continuity of existence unperceived. On the same lines, Bermudez suggests that certain basic recognitional capacities offer the right sort of escape from the continous present without demanding conceptual mastery. These are a subject's capacities for place recognition[19]. Bermudez himself claims that place recognition involves some notion of self-consciousness: "a creature recognising a particular place is aware not only that this place has existed in the past but also that it itself has been there before"[20]. What self-consciousness offers is the possibility of consceiving of objects as having existed in the past.

Finally, one should recall that, part of the significance of the notion of a point of view, is that it provides a sense of subject-object dualism richer than the minimal registering of the distinction between self and non-self. Any subject properly described as having ecological perception of the environment must be able to register the distinction between himself and the world. A genuine notion of point of view, however, requires the further feature that those bodily properties should be perceived as properties of one's self. In other words, a genuine notion of point of view should be able to be about oneself *in a way that is not accidental.* It cannot be the case that a genuine notion of point of view ascribes properties to an individual, who is in fact oneself, *without* one's being aware that the individual in question actually is oneself.

If, then, the exercise of a capacity for self-consciousness is a necessary condition of having experience that involves a temporally extended point of view, it seems that the self/world distinction, incorporated in Gibson's eco-

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19. At this point, the importance of place recognition in yielding a sense of objects of experience existing independently of their being experienced will not be discussed, first, because Bermudez' argument is based on a more important issue, the issue of self-consciousness and, second, because the issue of spatial recognition is an important issue in itself.

20. *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

logical perception of self and environment, must be significantly enriched before yielding a point of view. It must be enriched so as to provide an account of the *ontogeny* of self-consciousness. The story to be told here is one in which the higher forms of self-consciousness emerge from a restricted, but nonetheless detached, mode of consciousness of the self.

## 6. Perspectival Self-Consciousness and its relation to intentional action

The final move is to identify what might be termed as the *core requirement of genuinely self-conscious thought.* If this core feature can be specified without presupposing mastery of the first-person concept, then this will have been properly described as a form of non-conceptual self-consciousness.

Before proceeding, it is important to explain the difference between conceptual and non-conceptual self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is usually thought of as conceptual in character, as a form of thought that requires conceptual abilities. On this view, a self-conscious person has the concept of a self and the concept of mental states. He may believe that he is only one self among others. He is conscious of his own mental states, but he may also believe that other people have mental states too. He can reason using the concepts of himself, of other selves and of mental states in general. In effect, a subject has conscious states with conceptual content, if he possesses the relevant concepts and associated structured reasoning abilities. But self-consciousness need not be conceptual and it can be met by creatures without conceptual abilities. This sort of self-consciousness does not presuppose the concept of oneself, of one's conscious states, or of the object, or properties, of which one is conscious. Creatures in this sense can be self-conscious without having the richly normative conceptual and inferential abilities, which are distinctive of persons.

This form of primitive, non-conceptual self-consciousness will be defined as a creature's having a unified perspective, or as Hurley argues, having *perspectival self-consciousness.* Having perspectival self-consciousness means in part that what one experiences and perceives depends systematically on what one does, as well as vice versa. Moreover, it involves keeping track, even if not in conceptual terms, of the ways in which what one experiences and perceives, depends on what one does[21].

Perspectival self-consciousness provides one sense in which creatures can be self-conscious, even if they lack conceptual self-consciousness. A conscious creature moving through its environment has the ability to keep track of relationships between what it perceives and what it does. This ability in-

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21. S. L. HURLEY, *Consciousness in Action*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard U.P., 1998, p. 140.

volves its using information about itself and its own states and activities, as well as about its environment, to meet its needs. But it doesn't follow that this creature has a general concept of itself, or its conscious states, or the ability to reason systematically about aspects of itself, or of the environment, in a variety of ways detached from its needs. Its perspectival uses of information about itself may be context-bound. Its abilities need not have the generality, richly normative character and systematic recombinant structure of conceptual abilities.

This sense of non-conceptual self-consciousness turns on a subject's capacity to have intentions and act intentionally. A creature that acts intentionally is subject to at least some norms of practical rationality. Its actions depend holistically on relationships between what it perceives and what it intends. Relations between stimuli and responses are not invariant, but reflect relations between perceptions and intentions and various possibilities of mistake or misrepresentation. To count as intentional actions, a creature's movements must express contentful states that meet minimal normative constraints. Violations of norms are possible, but make sense only against a background of satisfaction of norms. A creature's behaviour can be structured and understood in terms of norms of consistency, which govern patterns among perceptions and intentions. In effect, intentional action requires a set of norms and behaviour rich enough to support distinction between consistency and inconsistency.

The existence of intentional action presupposes the existence of an order in the empirical, macroscopic, world, that can be described by information of a more general category (of a second order). In other words, out of a great number of complex interactions between components at a microscopic level, a macroscopic order emerges, one that unifies an immense amount of information in a comprised form. Such a unifying order cannot be reduced to the summation of its constitutive parts, but involves global, new characteristics emergent from the interaction between individual parts of complex systems. In this context, a system is considered complex in the sense that the description of its behaviour involves interactions between elements existing in different temporal and spatial scales. This conception emphasizes considerations about the organism as a whole, or as an integrated system.

The macroscopic level allows a certain level of *autonomy*, which is a fundamental characteristic of intentional action. The notion of autonomy can be understood as the difference between *action*, which unfolds from the dynamic structure of the organism as a whole and purely localized *reaction* to stimuli. Even without receiving external stimuli, the organism is not a passive, but an intrinsically active system. Any environmental stimulus (a change in external conditions) does not cause a process in an otherwise inert system, it only modifies processes in an autonomously active system. At

the macroscopic level of intentional action a creature behaves in ways that it need not have. In other words, there are so many ways in which that creature could have behaved. What is more, each form of action arises when a decision procedure emerges for deciding between competing possible courses of action.

Furthermore, such macroscopic organisation may lead to the development of dispositions. Dispositions can be understood as the inclination of a system to produce specific behaviour upon encountering adequate conditions. To possess a dispositional property is not to be in a particular state or to be in a particular change; it is to be bound or liable to be in a particular state, or to undergo a particular change, when a particular condition is realized. In this sense, dispositions constitute causal propensities. Moreover, when these propensities are repetitively actualised, they give rise to habits, which shape the behaviour of embodied organisms. Actions, in this context, should be distinguished from merely reactive behaviour. Actions incorporate an intricate web of dispositions which are susceptible of corrections and adjustments. Under proper conditions, these dispositions give place to habits responsible for the enhancement of the creature's ability to deal with tensions and fluctuations of its own body and of the environment. We may lump these together as the organism's *embodiment* in the organism and its environment. These dispositions are directly available to any creature in its experience, even though they may not be available to it conceptually. They are available to the creature as its experience-based knowledge of how to act on the object and respond to it.

The question that arises at this point is on what basis one can regard dispositions and embodiment as involving perspectival self-consciousness.

As it has been shown, the perspectival interdependence of perception and action involves, abilities to use information that is *about the self,* among other things. The abilities to use information about the self, that perspective involves must be seen as self-involving contents at the personal or animal level, in other words they must be attributable to the person or the animal. The reason is normativity. When perspectival information about the self leads to an invariant response and explains action only in the context set by the intentions and the constraints of, at least, primitive forms of practical rationality, then it counts as content at the personal or animal level. What is important in our case is that specification of this information about the self by reference to the notion of embodiment does not presuppose a conceptual grasp of the distinction between a self-conscious "subject" and context-independent "object". At the level of perceptual experience, however, all that the subject has is an experiential awareness of how to move, to act, etc., in response to local changes in its environment. This sort of awareness presents things as being *dependent* on the contingent characteristics of the subject it-

self, because they are available only to the experiencing organism while it is in the process of enjoying this experience. In other words, the perceptual object is necessarily local and context-dependent.

We must recall, however, that in the previous section it was argued that a genuine notion of point of view should be able to be about oneself in a way that is not accidental. Suppose we asked why accidental self-reference fails to count as genuine self-consciousness. The obvious answer is that thoughts that accidentally self-refer fail to have the immediate implications for action found in genuinely self-conscious thoughts[22]. In our case, having a disposition to act in a particular way, is closely bound up with *recognizing possibilities for action* relative to that feature and, when this is performed over a period of time, it is appropriate to speak of the formation of a basic inductive generalization about what to expect at a particular time and place. For example, when I intentionally turn my head to the right, it is no surprise that the stationary object in front of me swings toward the left of my visual field. That is what I expect. I intentionally turn my head and the object remains in the same place in my visual field, although I perceive the object as moving.

In this intentional context perspectival self-consciousness emerges. It is one of the key ways, by which one becomes aware that the body is responsive to one's will. Although not every portion of the bodily surface can be moved at will, every portion of the bodily surface can nonetheless be experienced as moving, in response to an act of the will. It seems fair to say that the limits of the will mark the distinction between the self and the non-self just as much as does the skin, although in a different way and that perspectival awareness of the self as the limit of the will is the first sense of non-conceptual self-consciousness.

To conclude, it is in the contents of intentional motor action of an ordinary, empirically, embodied kind – as opposed to acts of synthesizing, classifying, or conceptualising – that self-consciousness has its most natural home. As we have tried to show, there is a very basic connection between ordinary motor actions and self-consciousness. Our sense that there is something right about emphasizing the role of activity in self-consciousness stemmed in part from this basic connection. For that reason, our investigation about self-consciousness has been situated essentially in the domain of action and has focused on active embodied systems.

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22. BERMUDEZ, *op. cit.*, p. 148.