

Understanding the Concept “I” as a Phenomenal Concept

This paper defends a theory of the concept “I” as a *phenomenal concept*. That model, applied to the special case of the formation and use of the concept “I”, allows to explore the more general intuition that indexical thinking stands halfway between conceptual and nonconceptual thinking, and exhibits elements of both.

By the concept “I” I mean, not the sort of theoretical concept of “the Ego” or “the self” that philosophers may define for the purpose of describing the general phenomenon of subjectivity; but the ordinary individual notion that each subject forms spontaneously to designate themselves and store information about themselves, and that plays a central role in important aspects of our psychological life, notably reflective self-knowledge and conscious intentional agency.

The claims I want to defend here are the following:

- (i) This folk I-concept functions very much like concepts such as those we use when we think, e.g., of ‘this particular shade of red’ or “this ache”, i.e. *phenomenal concepts*.
- (ii) Understanding the concept “I” on this model sheds some light on the epistemology of I-thoughts, including the form of authoritativeness attached to first-personal reports of such thoughts, and immunity to error through misidentification (IEM).
- (iii) This model may additionally suggest a direction of investigation into the “why it matters” problem in the field of personal identity.

Phenomenal concepts are those we use to reflect on, classify and compare our experiences as such, leaving aside any consideration of the perceptible objects they are experiences of. Such are the concepts I apply in describing my subjective state when, for example, I’m aware of a smell of honeysuckle, when I have the sensation of pins and needles in my legs after sitting motionless, or when I’m prey to a feeling of *Sehnsucht*.

While their general function is straightforward enough, there is no consensus on the nature of phenomenal concepts. Some authors (e.g. Tye 2003, Chalmers 2003) take them to be a natural kind in their own right; others think that they are reducible to other kinds of concepts – e.g. *recognitional concepts* (Loar 1990), *demonstrative concepts* (Perry 2001) or *quotational concepts* (Papineau 2007a). However, all agree on what is special about phenomenal concepts: their acquisition demands that one *have* some phenomenal *experience* (e.g. as of a certain smell, a certain ache or a certain emotion), and that one be able to focus their attention on it so as to reuse the felt, intrinsic quality of that experience as a *label* to be put on further encounters with experiences of the same kind. For instance, to form a phenomenal concept referring to a particular shade of green, *qua* phenomenal appearance – *that* greenishness which contributes to individuating my experience as of a lime, say –, I need to be first *presented* with that appearance. (This much is uncontroversial in the thought-experiment about Mary the achromat scientist in Jackson 1982.) Furthermore, every subsequent reuse of the concept to think of other, suitably related experiences (perceptual, recollected or imagined) will involve a new occurrent instantiation of the appropriate greenish phenomenal quality (whether that instantiation is caused by perception, or recreated by mental imagery). In a nutshell, phenomenal concepts, while being concepts, rest crucially on the exposure to, retention, and reactivation of, some non-conceptual, purely qualitative dimension of experience.

My claim is that the foregoing is also true of the ordinary concept “I”. In this particular case, the felt quality or *sensibilium* used as a “label” for all that falls under the concept is, I submit, what some authors (e.g. Block, Zahavi, Levine, among others) have called the quality of “mineness” or “me-ishness”. Namely, that intrinsic quality of all of my experiences, present or remembered, that identifies them as *mine*. The idea can be traced back at least to William James, whose *Principles of Psychology* describe the distinctive phenomenal “self-brand” attached to all conscious mental states in the following terms:

[T]houghts [...] do not fly about loose, but seem each to belong to some one thinker and not to another. Each thought, out of a multitude of other thoughts of which it may think, is able to distinguish those which belong to its own Ego from those which do not. The former have a warmth and intimacy about them of which the latter are completely devoid, being merely conceived, in a cold and foreign fashion, and not appearing as blood-relatives, bringing their greetings to us from out of the past. [...]

The various members of the collection thus set apart are felt to belong with each other whenever they are thought at all. The animal warmth, etc., is their herd-mark, the brand from which they can never more escape. It runs through them all like a thread through a chaplet and makes them into a whole, which we treat as a unit, no matter how much in other ways the parts may differ *inter se*.

While James’s description is full of imagery, contemporary authors have tried to recapture the backing intuition in more abstract terms. Levine (2001), for example, proposes to analyse the phenomenal character of any experience into two components: on the one hand, the *qualitative character* – *what* it’s like to feel *x*; on the other hand, the *subjective character* – *what* it’s like *to me* to feel *x* – or, in phenomenological parlance, that which makes it the case that the experience as of *x* is “for me”, i.e. is given to *me*. My claim is that the second component of phenomenality, the “subjective character”, constitutes the qualitative basis for the formation of the concept “I”.

I present a series of arguments in support of the phenomenal-concept view of the concept “I”. The first group of arguments have to do with the predictive fecundity of this model as regards some salient aspects of the epistemology of I-thoughts, including the authoritativeness of first-personal reports of such thoughts, and immunity to error through misidentification (IEM). It has long been noted that phenomenal knowledge is, in a sense, *infallible*: while I may be wrong in thinking that I have a fever, or that the object I see is red, it wouldn’t make sense to say that I might be wrong in judging that I *appear* to see a red object, or that I *feel* feverish. There is accordingly less room for misapplication of phenomenal concepts than for misapplication of other types of concepts. My hypothesis is that the acquisition and subsequent use of the concept “I” are analogous to the acquisition and use of a phenomenal concept, so that applications of the concept “I” are based on the detection of a specific phenomenal quality of experiences – namely the distinctive subjective character of all experiences as they are given to their owner. This phenomenal basis could explain why there is no intelligible way in which I could be mistaken in thinking that my experiences are mine (IEM), and why, in consequence, first-personal reports in general (and not just first-personal reports of phenomenal states narrowly understood, e.g. pain, fear or boredom) are (*ceteris paribus*) authoritative (relative to the use of the first-person pronoun).

A final argument in support of my view is that it might shed some light on the “why it matters” problem in the field of personal-identity theory. It has been found difficult to explain why we should care so much about the preservation of our person, *qua* numerical

entity, while being far less concerned about whether the *properties* we instantiate continue to be instantiated or not. (If we were informed that we were going to die within an hour, for example, it would be no comfort to be told that a Doppelgänger with identical properties would come into existence at the very same time). This care for our own (numerical) continuity becomes less puzzling if we take our conception of ourselves to be grounded on some phenomenal aspect of experience. I offer a conjunction of two reasons. First, *valence* is rooted in the phenomenal dimension of experience: our evaluation of objects and events is largely (although not exclusively) grounded in the way the experiences they directly or indirectly cause *feel* to us. Second, phenomenality is strongly individuating. The phenomenal aspect of experience is *incommensurable* across persons: I have no direct phenomenal awareness of another person's experiences, hence no way of ascertaining whether this person feels the same way as I do, even when our respective experiences correlate with the same external objects. (Nothing short of my *having* the other person's experiences, which is a contradiction in terms, would enable me to compare their experiences with mine). If our I-concept is grounded on a continuous *sense* of self anchored in our every experience, so that being this "I" appears to us as inseparable from an ability to feel, then it may become less mysterious why our individual person should be so precious to us. That the entity we think of as "I" is inseparable from a way we feel is presumably what grounds the fact that we value this entity as we do; and that this phenomenal dimension is not reproducible across persons explains why, from our own point of view, nothing can replace our (numerical) being.

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