

Replies to Byrne and Longuenesse¹

APA Eastern Author-Meets-Critics Session, January 10, 2025

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(NB: Handout at end)

1. Introductory Remarks

I've been struggling with the question of how to offer some brief overview of my book as a basis for this session. Our time is short, and Alex and Béatrice will make their own remarks about what the book contains, so unless I keep my own remarks to a minimum, they will probably be redundant and will only delay the proceedings. But what minimal thing could it make sense to say?

If I say my book is about our knowledge of our own minds, that will be true but also misleading inasmuch as, in contemporary philosophical discussion, the topic of self-knowledge tends to be conceived as a special problem in epistemology, whereas the ambition of my book is to bring out that it's something more than this. Since Alex and Béatrice will focus on particular ideas and arguments, it may make sense for me to say something brief about the broader ambitions of the book.

When I say that self-knowledge is commonly treated as a special topic in epistemology, I mean that it is treated by many philosophers as the application of a general problematic about knowledge to a special domain (cf. epistemology of mathematics, of causation, of testimony, etc.). The general problem of knowledge is to explain what it is for a belief to be based in the right way on a corresponding fact; different domains raise different puzzles about the nature of this basing relation. In the case of self-knowledge, the puzzle arises from the fact that we seem to be able to know certain facts about our present mental states

¹ These are notes-to-self, not a finished text. They are telegraphic in many places. But I hope they convey the general idea of what I aim to say in the session.

in an immediate and non-observational way; the problem is to explain what makes this possible. The philosophical topic of self-knowledge is commonly defined in this way both by philosophers who accept that we possess a sphere of privileged self-knowledge and also by skeptics who deny that our knowledge of our own minds is epistemically special.

My book was inspired by a different view — characteristic of Kant among other figures in the Rationalist tradition — that sees self-knowledge, not merely as a special body of knowledge we happen to have about our own minds, but as the mere articulation of an awareness that we all necessarily possess simply in virtue of having rational minds at all, a kind of byproduct of an implicit self-awareness that makes us capable of thinking about any topic. I think of this idea as connected with another thought that has always attracted me, namely that there is a kind of knowledge that all of us necessarily have available to us — a sphere of things we all already tacit know and merely have to bring to clarity through reflection. As I read Kant, he thinks of our philosophical understanding of our own cognitive powers and also our understanding of central topics in metaphysics as achieved through a reflective articulation of this necessary self-awareness. I hoped in my book to show the path from a modest, epistemological formulation of the problem of self-knowledge to an appreciation of this wider significance of the topic.

That was my ambition, but the book I have ended up writing also reflects a shift in my thinking about how to approach this topic. My original inspiration came from Kant's idea that the crux of self-awareness consists in the capacity to “accompany one's representations with I think”, and that this “I think” expresses, not so much a representation of a particular object, as the form of cognition in general. But I've come to think that Kant's focus on explicit self-ascriptions of thinking gives a one-sided picture of self-awareness, one that focuses on the reflective expression of this awareness and neglects a more basic kind of self-awareness that is pre-reflective. So my book has ended up being a synthesis of a Kantian view of the significance of human self-awareness with a set of Sartrean ideas about how to conceive of self-awareness, an approach that sees its fundamental expression not in certain self-ascriptive thoughts, but in the structure of human consciousness in general.

The resulting inquiry leads me to consider many topics: the nature of first person thought, the analysis of bodily awareness, the basis of our capacity to know the reasons for our own thoughts and actions, the possibility of doing psychology from an armchair, and the importance of self-knowledge in a flourishing human life. I can't hope to summarize all these discussions here, or even really to evoke them, but I hope that this session may encourage some people to check out the book, and I hope the book itself may convince even people who dispute the details of my analysis that there is a rich vein of material for exploration here, one that links the topic of self-knowledge as it is standardly conceived with topics about the general nature and structure of rational mindedness.

2. Reply to Byrne

[Heartfelt expressions of gratitude and other forms of indebtedness.]

Byrne challenges me to say why what I call “nonpositional consciousness of consciousness” involves a genuine awareness of one’s own psychic state. He anticipates and dismisses much of what I will say in response, so what I say here may be disappointing, but I will try to say what convinces me, at any rate.

In my book, I argue that there is an intelligible relationship between certain modes of thinking about the world and corresponding explicit thoughts about our own mental states. [Examples.] If this is granted, then a lot has already been achieved, and the question of how to characterize the transition we make from the one to the other is about how best to theorize a real phenomenon, and one that is more specific than “transparency” in general. So that would already be something.

My more specific proposal of course is that there is a distinctive kind of pre-reflective awareness of our own consciousness embodied in these modes of thinking about the world, and a distinctive type of cognitive transition, which I call “reflection”, from such pre-reflective self-awareness to explicit, self-ascriptive thoughts. Each of these phenomena — the pre-reflective awareness and the reflective transition to knowledge — is what it is and

not another thing, as Bishop Butler would say. If the starting point does not qualify as awareness of my own mental state in some pre-established sense, I am not necessarily concerned, so long as I have shown a real and intelligible relationship between the subject's pre-reflective starting point and her reflective conclusion.

I certainly grant Byrne's point that awareness of an X does not in general imply knowledge that it is an X. I aim to give an account of why the specific kind pre-reflective awareness we have of our own mental states involves a kind of understanding that supports (but does not yet constitute) explicit knowledge of my own state. My idea is that the modes of presentation involved in pre-reflective consciousness of non-mental topics express an understanding-as-subject of the relevant modes of consciousness themselves. What qualifies these ways of thinking as a kind of implicit understanding of ourselves comes out when we consider that our responsiveness is intelligently sensitive, not just to the object to which we respond, but to the mode in which we take up that object for engagement. By "intelligently sensitive", I mean open to question and criticism in just that dimension. E.g. (and allowing myself, as ever, to appeal to forms of speech as a proxy for modes of thought) if I advert to "this cat", and the "this" is a perceptual demonstrative, then there is a specific set of challenges I must be prepared to meet (e.g., "Which?" "Where?") that show a familiarity not just with cats, but with a certain way of having an object available for thinking. I would say: this shows understanding-as-subject of perceiving as a distinctive mode of consciousness of an object.

We could, but need not, introduce a special verbal marker for this mode of thinking of an object (a "this_P" to mark perceptual demonstrative thinking akin to my "will_{NT}" to mark a certain decisive way of thinking of a future action). We could also, but need not, introduce special concepts for the mental states thus expressed (perception, intention). What matters fundamentally is the distinctiveness of the mode of presentation itself, whether or not it has a special marker. But NB my thought that certain psychological concepts could be framed on the basis of reflection (see my chapter on armchair psychology): this contributes to my account of how the reflective application of such concepts is justified.

(Finally, about my chapter on inference and Boghossian’s “taking condition”: My view isn’t that the “potential for reflection” on one’s inference from P to Q constitutes taking Q to follow from P, but that this potential is a necessary consequence of such taking, and so sets a necessary condition that an account of taking-to-follow must meet. But I think this potential is not brute but is itself intelligible, in a manner analogous to the intelligibility of the transition we make in self-reflection. Just as I can move from a certain mode of presentation of a cat to awareness that I myself perceive a cat, so I can move from a certain mode of presentation of a proposition Q (as true-for-a-specific-reason, a mode of thinking-true we naturally express with a “so” but might show an intelligent sensitivity to even in the absence of a special verbal marker) to an articulation of the reflective thought: Q follows from P.)

3. Reply to Longuenesse

[More heartfelt expressions of gratitude and other forms of indebtedness.]

Longuenesse suggests that I use “transparent” in two ways: (1) intransitively, as a label for the fact that pre-reflective self-consciousness is not positional (i.e., does not present our own state of consciousness as an intentional object of consciousness), and (2) transitively, to characterize the fact that we can answer various questions about our own states of mind on the basis of our answers to corresponding questions about the non-mental world. This is a fair characterization, but I would tell the story in a different order. I start from what contemporary writers on self-knowledge call the “problem of transparency” — the puzzlingness of fact (2) — and argue that we can understand how such transparency is possible by recognizing that there is a kind of awareness of our own mental states that is expressed nonpositionally in our thinking about the world (an awareness that is thus transparent in sense (1)). I seek to offer a positive account of this non-positional consciousness of our own consciousness, one that makes it intelligible that thinking about the world can be the basis for knowing one’s own mind.

One question Longuenesse raises is whether my answer to the question whether I believe that P can really be “transparent” to the question whether P, given that asserting “I believe that P” requires understanding myself as the subject who possesses this belief (among other mental states) and also understanding what a belief is, neither of which items of understanding is available simply on the basis of a consideration of whether P.

I agree that in thinking I believe that P, one exercises forms of conceptual understanding not exercised in simply thinking P. I would distinguish the information needed to ascribe a particular belief to myself from the understanding required to make such an ascription. I argue that, in making such a self-ascription, one needs no more information than what is implicitly contained in one’s answer to the question whether P; but I admit that one does need to possess a self-notion (expressed by “I”) and a concept of belief. I go on to argue, however, that each of these forms of understanding can itself be achieved through mere reflection. Commonsense psychological concepts such as belief can be framed through reflection on the distinctive modes through which we present non-mental topics (this is the topic of my Chapter 8), and our notion of ourselves can be framed through reflection on a certain presupposed unity that we can recognize, on reflection, as the presupposed basis of all our various modes of presenting objects of consciousness (this is the topic of my Chapter 5).

Longuenesse’s second question concerns how I conceive of reflection and how my notion of reflection is related to the Sartrean notion that is my inspiration. She observes that, for Sartre, reflection is a form of positional consciousness of my own consciousness, and thus a form of knowledge of my own psychic states. She takes my notion of reflection to be different, inasmuch as I hold that reflective self-ascriptions do not add any content to the original state.

But this misunderstands my view. What I mean by “reflection” is the self-ascription of a mental state, as a result of bringing psychological concepts to bear to make explicit our nonpositional consciousness of our own consciousness. So for me, reflective thoughts do “posit” our own mental states as such (inasmuch as they make explicit self-ascriptions),

and they do (other things equal) constitute knowledge of these states. I meant to follow Sartre in these respects. But I take this to be consistent with the idea that reflective thoughts merely make explicit what was implicit in our nonpositional self-consciousness. So care is needed when answering the question whether these thoughts “add content” to our pre-reflective self-awareness. In one way, they do; in another way, they don’t. I argue that they bring concepts to bear to make explicit an awareness that formerly existed, not as the explicit content of any thought, but implicitly in the modes of our thinking about the non-mental world. In Chapter 8 of my book, I call this a “mode-to-content shift”.

Part of what makes Longuenesse think that my notion of reflection must be different from Sartre’s is that she takes it that, for Sartre, any positional consciousness must imply “a strong distinction between the conscious state ... and the objects of which it is positional consciousness” (8-9). So she thinks admitting that reflective thoughts are positional would require accepting that they are higher-order thoughts about our own conscious states, rather than mere bringings of these very states to explicit self-comprehension. As she anticipates, however, I think that, on Sartre’s mature view, these points about the strong distinction between consciousness and its object hold for what he calls “impure reflection” but not for what he calls “pure reflection”. Pure reflection for Sartre is a kind of limiting case of positional knowledge, in which there is the closest possible relationship between the “object” that is posited and the consciousness that does the positing. This leads Sartre to some strange formulations, in which he seems to assert that reflection is a form of knowledge only then to take this back:

Reflection is a knowledge; of that there is no doubt. It is provided with a positional character; it affirms the consciousness reflected-on. But ... [t]o know it to make oneself other. Now the reflective can not make itself wholly other than the reflected-on since it is-in-order-to-be the reflected-on. Its affirmation is stopped halfway because its negation is not entirely realized... Reflection is a recognition rather than knowledge. (Being and Nothingness, Richmond translation, pp. 155-156)

In my book, I try to show that these seemingly contradictory formulations are not as paradoxical as they appear: there is indeed a limiting case of knowledge — perhaps better called a “recognition” — in which there is a positing that does not make itself other than that which it posits. This is pure reflection; I take it to be what is expressed in the cases of immersed self-awareness (“I am trying to hang a picture”, “I am counting”) that Longuenesse classifies (following the early Sartre of “The Transcendence of the Ego”) as pre-reflective.²

Sartre suggests that, as a matter of fact, almost all of our reflective self-knowledge is impure: it does not merely make consciousness reflectively aware of itself, but “surpasses” this consciousness to “make further claims”, and thus amounts to a further consciousness distinct from the consciousness on which it reflects. As a matter of principle, however, he holds that impure reflective consciousness depends on pure reflection: the latter is the source of the reflective self-awareness that impure reflection surpasses. All this seems plausible to me. The focus of my book is pure reflection, the kind of reflection that makes explicit self-knowledge possible, though I say a bit about impure forms of reflection in my final chapter.

² There are further complications that I cannot go into here. Sartre thinks that various categories of the psychical — the very idea of a mental state, for instance — constitutively involve impurity: they reify and thereby necessarily distort the being of consciousness. I think this is interesting, and not implausible, but it goes beyond any point that I manage to get into focus in my book.

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Matthew Boyle, University of Chicago

(Full-ish text: <https://philpapers.org/archive/BOYRTB.pdf>)

1. Transparency as phenomenon and as problem

The phenomenon:

It seems that I can know various aspects of the nature of my own present mental states by attending, not to anything “inner” or psychological, but to aspects of the world at large.

- Evans’s observation about belief: “In making a self-ascription of belief, one’s eyes are, so to speak, or occasionally literally, directed outward—upon the world... I get myself in a position to answer the question whether I believe that p by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether p .” (Evans 1982, p. 225)
- Other cases: knowing whether I want X by considering whether X is desirable, knowing whether I intend to do A by considering whether I am going to A , knowing how the object before me looks to me by considering what the object is like, etc.

The problem:

What justifies me in answering a question about my own psychology by looking to a seemingly quite independent fact about the world?

This Problem of Transparency focuses our attention, not just on the question how we know our own minds, but on how this knowledge is related to our capacity to engage with the non-mental world.

2. The reflectivist approach to transparency

The basic idea:

We are warranted in self-ascribing various sorts of mental states on the basis of a consideration of the world because there is already a kind of self-awareness implicit in the relevant ways of representing the world.

The step to self-ascription is not the advent of new knowledge, but merely the reflective articulation of an awareness already implicit in the subject’s way of regarding the world.

Problems for reflectivism:

1. What can it mean to say that I “tacitly know” my own state of mind? If in some significant sense I do not know it explicitly, in what sense do I know it at all?
2. Knowledge is commonly assumed to be subject to a Concept Possession Requirement:
(CPR) A subject can know that P only if she possesses the concepts necessary for understanding the proposition that P .

But surely I can believe that P without possessing the concept belief. So any “tacit knowledge” of

belief involved in believing cannot be subject to (CPR). But then what does this knowledge come to, and how does it explain explicit self-knowledge?

3. The idea of nonpositional self-consciousness

Sartre on nonpositional self-consciousness:

- (S1) “All consciousness ... is consciousness of something. This means that there is no consciousness that is not a positing of a transcendent object” (B&N 2021: 9).
- (S2) “All positional consciousness of an object is at the same time nonpositional consciousness of itself” (B&N: 11).
- (S3) “It is the non-reflective consciousness that makes reflection possible” (B&N: 12).

Nonpositional consciousness of perception:

Consider a subject who makes a transition from the world-oriented observation

(P1) This cat is purring

to the reflective thought

(P2) I perceive a purring cat.

On a natural reading, (P1) represents the cat as available for perceptual demonstrative reference. But an object is available for such reference only if it is perceived by that subject. The subject’s capacity to represent perceived objects in this way depends on her implicit awareness of her own perceiving. When she thinks (P2), she simply makes this nonpositional consciousness explicit.

Non-positional consciousness of intention:

Consider a subject who makes a transition from the world-oriented claim

(I1) I am going to do A.

to the reflective thought

(I2) I intend to do A.

On a natural reading, (I1) presents what the subject will do in the future as settled, not in just any way, but in a way that expresses intention. The subject’s capacity to represent her own future as settled in this way depends on an implicit awareness of her intending. When she thinks (I2), she simply makes this nonpositional consciousness explicit.

4. Reply to Byrne

Byrne asks what justifies my claim that certain modes of thinking about the world express awareness of our own mental states, rather than – if anything – simply expressing these states themselves.

- I argue that there is an intelligible relationship between certain modes of thinking about the world and corresponding self-ascriptive thoughts (cf. §3). If this is granted, then the question how to characterize the transition we make is about how best to theorize a real phenomenon, and one that is more specific than “transparency” per se. So that would already be something.
- My proposal is that there is a distinctive kind of pre-reflective self-awareness (“nonpositional consciousness”) embodied in the relevant modes of thinking, and a distinctive kind of transition (“reflection”) from such awareness to explicit self-ascription. Each of these is what it is and not another thing: if the starting point does not qualify as awareness of one’s own mental state in some pre-established sense, I am not necessarily concerned, so long as I have shown a real and intelligible

relationship between the world-directed thinking and the self-directed thinking.

Byrne points out that awareness of an X does not in general imply knowledge that it is an X.

- True, but I aim to explain why the specific kind of pre-reflective awareness we have of our own mental states involves a kind of understanding that supports explicit knowledge-that.
- What qualifies these ways of thinking as involving a kind of implicit understanding comes out when we consider that our responsiveness is intelligently sensitive, not just to the object to which we respond, but to our own mode of engagement with that object. By “intelligently sensitive”, I mean open to question and criticism.
- E.g., if I advert to “this cat”, there is a specific set of challenges I must be prepared to meet (e.g., “Which?”, “Where?”). These show a familiarity, not just with cats, but with a certain way of having an object available for consideration. I would say: they show understanding-as-subject of perceiving as a distinctive mode of consciousness of an object.
- In my book, I also argue that we could introduce certain psychological concepts on the basis of reflection on such modes of presentation. This contributes to my account of how the reflective application of these concepts is justified.

5. Reply to Longuenesse

Longuenesse suggests I use “transparent” in two ways: (1) intransitively, to mark the fact that our pre-reflective self-consciousness does not present our own conscious states as an intentional object, and (2) transitively, to characterize the fact that we can answer certain questions about our own mental states on the basis of answers to corresponding questions about the non-mental world.

- This is fair, but I would tell the story in a different order. I start from the “problem of transparency” (see §1) and argue that we can understand how such transparency is possible by recognizing that there is kind of awareness of our own mental states that is expressed “nonpositionally” in our thinking about the world (see §3). This knowledge may be called “transparent” (sense 1) insofar as it explains the phenomenon of transparency (sense 2).

Longuenesse asks how the question whether I believe that P can be transparent to the question whether P, given that comprehendingly asserting “I believe that P” requires understanding myself as the underlying subject (“I”) in a specific kind of state (belief), and neither of these forms of understanding is available simply on the basis of a consideration of whether P.

- I agree that in thinking I believe that P, one exercises forms of conceptual understanding not exercised in simply thinking that P. But I would distinguish the information needed to self-ascribe a belief from the understanding needed to make such an ascription. I argue that making such a self-ascription requires no more information than what is implicitly contained in one’s answer to whether P; but I admit that one does need to possess a notion of Self and a concept of belief.
- But I go on to argue that each of these forms of understanding can itself be achieved through mere reflection: commonsense psychological concepts like belief can be framed through reflection on the distinctive modes through which we present non-mental topics (see my Chapter 8), and the notion of Self can be framed through reflection a unity that we can recognize, on reflection, as the presupposed basis of our various modes of presenting worldly objects (see my Chapter 5).

Longuenesse also asks how my notion of reflection relates to the Sartrean notion that is my inspiration. She points out that, for Sartre, reflection is a form of positional consciousness of my own consciousness, and so a form of knowledge of my own psychic state. She takes my notion of reflection to be different, inasmuch as I hold that reflective self-ascriptions “do not add any content” to the state on which they reflect.

- This misunderstands my view. What I mean by “reflection” is the self-ascription of a mental state as a result of bringing psychological concepts to bear to make explicit our nonpositional consciousness of our own consciousness. So for me, reflective thoughts do “posit” our own mental states (inasmuch as they make explicit self-ascriptions), and they do (other things equal) constitute knowledge of these states.
- But I take this to be consistent with the idea that reflective self-ascriptions merely make explicit what was implicit in our nonpositional self-consciousness. So care is needed in saying whether they “add content” to our pre-reflective self-awareness. In one way, they do; in another way, they don’t.

Longuenesse thinks my notion of reflection must be different from Sartre’s because she thinks that, for Sartre, any positional consciousness must imply “a strong distinction between the conscious state ... and the objects of which it is positional consciousness. Hence she thinks admitting that reflective self-ascriptions are positional would require accepting that they are higher-order thoughts distinct from the conscious states on which they reflect.

- I think that, on Sartre’s mature view, only “impure reflection” involves such a distinction. In B&N, Sartre introduces the term “pure reflection” as a kind of limiting case of positional knowledge, in which there is the closest possible relationship between the “object” that is posited and the consciousness that does the positing.
- This leads Sartre to formulations in which he seems to assert that reflection is a form of knowledge only to take this back:

Reflection is a knowledge; of that there is no doubt. It is provided with a positional character; it affirms the consciousness reflected-on. But ... [t]o know it to make oneself other. Now the reflective can not make itself wholly other than the reflected-on since it is-in-order-to-be the reflected-on. Its affirmation is stopped halfway because its negation is not entirely realized... Reflection is a recognition rather than knowledge. (B&N 2021: 155-156)

- In my book, I try to show that Sartre’s position here is coherent: there is indeed a limiting case of knowledge (better called “recognition”) in which there is a positing that does not make itself other than that which it posits. This is pure reflection, and I take it to be what is expressed in the examples of immersed self awareness (“I am trying to hand a picture”, “I am counting”) that Longuenesse classifies as pre-reflective.
- Sartre holds that, as a matter of fact, almost all of our reflective self-knowledge is impure: it does not merely make consciousness reflectively aware of itself, but “surpasses” this consciousness to “make further claims” (BN 2021: 155), and hence constitutes a further consciousness distinct from the consciousness on which it reflects. As a matter of principle, however, he holds that impure reflection depends on pure reflection: the latter is the source of the self-awareness that is “surpassed”.
- The focus of my book is on pure reflection, the kind of reflection that makes explicit self-knowledge possible at all, though I say a bit about impure forms of reflection in my final chapter.