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The self and self-knowledge

By Annalisa Coliva

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. x + 286. H/b £47.50.

Annalisa Coliva's collection on self-knowledge brings together papers presented originally at two conferences, the first held in Bigorio, Switzerland in 2004 and the second at the Institute of Philosophy in London in 2008.

The collection is divided into three sections. Part One addresses the nature and individuation of the self, with contributions from Carol Rovane, Martine Nida-Rümelin, Christopher Peacocke, and John Campbell. Part Two comprises papers from Jane Heal, Conor McHugh and Lucy O'Brien, as well as a brief response from Peacocke to Heal and O'Brien, and focuses on explanation of our warrant in self-ascribing conscious mental states and actions. Discussion of transparency and authority are at the core of Part Three, with papers from Dorit Bar-On, Paul Snowdon, Akeel Bilgrami and Coliva.

With both the middle section dedicated to discussion of Peacocke's account of self-knowledge and a paper by him on first-person content and the metaphysics of the subject, the volume reflects the impact of Peacocke's contribution to these topics, and will be of particular interest to scholars of his work. Owing to the constraints of space, I will focus on these papers. They are not the sum of the collection's relevance and appeal, however, and there is much more of interest than it is possible for me to engage with here. Of particular note are the pairing of Coliva's defence of a limited constitutivism, applicable only to commitments and performatives and Snowdon's attentive examination of the claims that our knowledge of our phenomenal states has the features of authority, transparency and groundlessness in his critique of Crispin Wright's constitutive account of self-knowledge (*Rails to infinity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). Nida-Rümelin's argument for the claim that the intuitive appeal

of subject-body dualism arises from the fact that the first-person concept is the concept of a 'perfect individual'—something not constituted by its properties or its material constitution—is also intriguing, as is Campbell's claim that, because self-knowledge depends on our having knowledge of the causal connections between our mental states, it will thereby depend on our having knowledge of the way perception influences our beliefs.

In 'Subjects and Consciousness' Peacocke gives a constitutive account of non-conceptual self-representation as well as detailing the metaphysical view of the self that is determined by that account. For a subject to have a non-conceptual self-representation the following necessary conditions must be met: the subject must have subject-reflexive mental states, and she must have a mental file on herself in which relevant predicative contents are integrated. A non-conceptual content will be of the first-person type if it refers *de jure* to the subject of the mental state or event of which it is the content. First-person contents refer to the subjects of the states in which they appear.

Self-representation, thus understood, underlies Peacocke's account of the first-person concept, developed in more detail in other work (*The mirror of the world*, Oxford: OUP, 2013). It is by having perceptual experiences and action-awareness with nonconceptual first-person content that a subject is able to know that she has the property of being a self-referrer, for example, and it is in this way that we can explain the self-consciousness of first-person concept-use.

One question that arises when reading Peacocke's account of self-representation is whether we need to posit nonconceptual first-person contents in order to account for the capacities of adult humans to think and act. Peacocke allows not only that there may be a degree 0 level of self-representation, but that creatures who thus lack the capacity

for self-representation entirely can build up a cognitive map of their environment, can be credited with intentions, can act, and so on, all by the use of a 'here' content. This seems to put pressure on the idea that we have a first-person content that features in nonconceptual mental states. Furthermore, we might wonder whether positing a nonconceptual content which has all the characteristics of the first-person concept that resist easy explanation really provides an explanation of how the first-person concept has those characteristics. The account seems to have pushed the problems we have in explaining first-person thought down a level, and in doing so we are forced to posit a content that refers, somewhat mysteriously, to the subject as subject.

In giving an account of knowledge of our psychological states, our goal is that of explaining why our self-ascriptions of our psychological states and episodes are warranted, without, in doing so, jeopardizing the reliability and robustness of self-knowledge. Peacocke's solution to the problem focuses on consciousness as reason giving: the conscious occurrence of an episode of judging that p , for example, will give the subject a reason to self-ascribe the belief that p (*Being known*, Oxford: OUP, 1999). When the self-ascription of the belief is made for that reason, the self-ascription will be warranted. In 'Reasons and Self-Knowledge' McHugh develops the proposal, analysing both what kind of access and what it is that must be accessed by a subject in order for her to count as being justified in self-ascribing a psychological state. His aim is to avoid a worry raised by Coliva to the effect that for a subject to have a reason to self-ascribe a psychological state, she must already have knowledge of that state ('Peacocke's self-knowledge'. *Ratio (New series)*, 2008; 21: 13-27). He also defends the account from a further objection from Coliva. One way of developing the proposal is in terms of there being something it is like for the subject when she consciously judges, hopes, and so on: it is in virtue of their phenomenology that these conscious episodes provide the subject

with reasons for their self-ascription. Coliva objects that certain types of conscious state can either fail to have a distinctive phenomenology, or—perhaps as in the case of wishful thinking—can have the phenomenology characteristic of a different kind of state, with the consequence that it will be rational for the subject to self-ascribe the state as a state of the wrong kind. McHugh's response takes the form of an elaboration of the way in which the phenomenology of conscious states *can* reflect their type, and the way in which this phenomenology can make certain judgements rational, including, but not limited to, the self-ascription of those states.

In 'Consciousness and Self-Awareness' Heal—focusing on what a subject is able to self-ascribe rather than what she is justified in self-ascribing—urges the need for modification of Peacocke's proposal on the grounds that some states, while manifested in consciousness, cannot be self-ascribed by their subjects. She gives the example of a subject whose fear of authority figures is, in some sense, revealed in her conscious thoughts and experiences, yet who does not recognise that she fears. The subject's fear is manifested in consciousness, she has the concept of fear, yet she is unable to self-ascribe fearing.

For this to be a counter-example to the view that a state's being conscious provides the subject with a reason to self-ascribe that state we would have to think that the subject in question consciously fears yet doesn't have a reason for the self-ascription. Yet, as Peacocke points out in his response (pp. 180-181), this doesn't seem to be the case. We should distinguish conscious fearing from unconscious fearing which results in certain other conscious thoughts and experiences. Since we need not think that the conscious episodes that result from an unconscious fearing make that fearing conscious, we do not have a case in which a subject consciously fears yet is unable to self-ascribe fearing. Moreover, the subject who has conscious unpleasant experiences

that are distinct from fear when in the presence of authority figures will have reason to self-ascribe those unpleasant experiences, if she possesses the appropriate concepts. Rather than acting as a counter-example, Heal's case in fact provides a useful illustration of the workings of the account.

Self-knowledge is not limited to knowledge of our psychological attitudes: we can know our actions also. In 'Knowledge of actions and tryings' O'Brien's target is an account of agents' knowledge according to which tryings have some explanatory role to play. Peacocke offers a sophisticated version of this kind of account: tryings cause both actions and action awareness (*Truly understood*, Oxford: OUP, 2008). We are entitled to take this non-perceptual action awareness at face value, and in doing so we have knowledge of our actions because the cause of the action awareness, the trying, is also the cause of the action. O'Brien's criticism revolves around Peacocke's commitment to its being possible, for any mental action a subject performs, for that subject to believe that she has acted when she has not. If action awareness is produced by a trying rather than an action, then it should always be possible for a trying to cause action awareness while failing to produce the respective action. O'Brien contends that, in fact, there are a considerable number of mental actions for which trying to perform the action will amount to success (p. 171), so that it is not possible for action and knowledge of action to come apart.

Coliva states her aim in compiling the collection as being that of allowing for the development of sophisticated arguments, thereby furthering current debates about the self and self-knowledge. The volume is therefore best suited to those with a good grasp of the topic. It is worth noting that the chapters by Rovane, Bar-On and Bilgrami offer statements of accounts they have presented in greater detail elsewhere (Rovane, C. *The bounds of agency*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998; Bar-On, D. *Speaking*

my mind, Oxford: OUP, 2004; Bilgrami, A. *Self-knowledge and resentment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). This notwithstanding, the collection is successful in achieving Coliva's aims, and the papers within are challenging and stimulating additions to the self-knowledge literature.

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