



## Comment on A. Thomasson, “Self-Awareness and Self-Knowledge”

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I raise an objection to Thomasson’s suggestion that our privileged access to our own conscious states is to be explained by “conceptual transformations” and argue in favor of an inner awareness view favored by Aristotle and Brentano.

In her ambitious and stimulating paper, Amie Thomasson sets out to show that all “one-level” inner awareness views face a dilemma and should therefore be rejected. She then reevaluates the evidence allegedly in their favor, before providing her own account of what is distinctive of first-person knowledge of our mental experiences. In my comments, I will work through the dialectic in reverse. First, I will raise questions about her positive proposal, before turning briefly to the evidence for an inner awareness view, and then finally address the dilemma she poses for inner awareness accounts.

First-person knowledge seems to differ from the knowledge others have of our experiences in that it seems to be in some way *privileged*, if not actually infallible: our judgements about our occurrent experiences don’t seem prone to the same errors that others’ judgements are. It also seems to be somehow *immediate*, rather than the result of inference. But this is not to be explained, according to Thomasson, by our being *aware of* these experiences, at least not in general. Rather such knowledge is to be explained in terms of “conceptual transformations” of experiences. Towards the end of her paper, she summarizes her proposal as follows:

Nonetheless, this preliminary exposition should at least suggest a way to account for first-person knowledge based not on inner awareness, but

rather on the availability of such first-order experiences ... for conceptual transformations that license us to move, e.g., from claims about the world represented to claims about our ways of representing the world.

What are “conceptual transformations”? It seems to be something we *do* to our experiences,<sup>1</sup> and in so doing we “shift our attention” from what representations represent to the representations themselves. This shift in attention is due to a difference in content. When we make conceptual transformations, we “move ... from the performance or ‘use’ of experiences ... to *judgments about* how things seem” (emphasis added). That sounds something like a kind of inference, broadly understood. And Thomasson frequently speaks of such moves as “licensed” by conceptual connections between the different stages. Such sanctioned moves are always available to us, in her view, and it is this fact that makes it seem as though we have a privileged and immediate source of knowledge about our own experiences.<sup>2</sup>

There are two sorts of moves Thomasson has in mind in particular, “reductive” and “hypostatizing” transformations, and in each case there are parallels with speech acts. Using a reductive transformation, for example, we can move from Carol’s assertion that

1. Jim has a gun

to the further assertion that

2. Someone is asserting that Jim has a gun

and then once more, by a hypostatizing transformation, to the assertion that

3. The assertion that Jim has a gun is being made.

Similarly, she claims, we can move from a conscious mental state which presents

1. There is a puddle

to believing that

2’. It appears as if there is a puddle

and perhaps even to believing that

3’. There is an appearance as-if of a puddle.

The move from (2) to (3), or likewise from (2’) to (3’), is meant to be fairly trivial. And if we put to one side the question of ontological commitment, it is clear that (3) and (3’) are just periphrastic versions of (2) and (2’). The only issue that makes us pause, in fact, is the question of whether the nominalizations in (3) and (3’) carry a distinct ontological commitment. In this regard, the moves involved are no different than the move from

2”. Eva sprinted in the last ten seconds of the race.

to

3”. Eva’s sprint occurred in the last ten seconds of the race.

And though such worries have a place, they are not central to our concerns here.

The move from (1) to (2) or from (1) to (2’), in contrast, is not trivial. (1) doesn’t entail anything like (2) or (2’): there are no conceptual connections here of any sort. It is rather Carol’s *asserting* (1) which *makes* (2) *true* and similarly my *having a conscious state* which presents (1) as the case that *makes* (2’) *true*. And here there is the tightest of connections: these just *are* the truth conditions for (2) and (2’), respectively. If these

conditions obtain, then (2) and (2') will be true.<sup>3</sup> But the question is, what good does all this do *me*, if I don't already have some *awareness* of the fact that they do obtain? Otherwise, wouldn't the conceptual connections here equally license third-person judgements about our mental experiences, just as they plainly do in the case of speech acts? How, in short, do these connections speak to either the *immediacy* or *privileged access* that first-person knowledge appears to have? It is not clear how the connections involved here give us any distinct kind of leverage.

Thomasson seems to be aware that the comparison with speech acts cuts both ways. Here is how she resolves the issue:

[Speech acts] are *public*, and available for transformations by the speaker or any hearer; [conscious states] are *private*, and so only available for transformation by the person who has them. Given the privacy of the original experience, it is only the person undergoing the experience who is *in a position* to undertake these trivial transformations ... Others can at best make inferences from external circumstances and behaviors ... (emphasis added)

Unlike speech acts, which are equally available to speaker and hearer, mental experiences are only available in the relevant way to the subjects who bear them — they are the only ones “in a position” to make the connection. But if we are not immediately *aware of* our own experiences, what distinctive access do *we* have to the experience itself? The content of first-order experiences will be about the world, not about themselves. The only distinction left, it would seem, is that we are *having* the experience, whereas those around us are not. But that doesn't give us either immediacy or privileged access. The mere fact that I have a particular body temperature—say, 99.1 F—licenses the judgement that I have a body temperature of 99.1. But my coming to such a judgement is no more immediate or assured than the judgements of those around me, even though it is a fact about me and not them. And this holds for representational states as well: in the blindsighter's case, his having certain representational states is not sufficient *for him* to make those transformations. Adding the requirement that such states must be conscious won't help on the current account: for Thomasson, conscious states are states in which we are aware of the world, and not those in which we have some internal awareness of the state itself. The question still remains: what puts us in a distinctive position with regard to our own mental states, if we do not also have an awareness *that* we are having them? How will it help us, in particular, to discern features of that experience, such as its modality—whether, for example, we are *seeing* the shape of an object rather than *feeling* it?

In light of this, I think it is worth returning to the evidence in favor of internal awareness views. Thomasson's main strategy is to show that the evidence admits of alternative interpretations: roughly, she shows it is possible to reconstrue the linguistic and phenomenal evidence as evidence, not for an inner awareness of our conscious states, but simply for certain distinctive features of first-person knowledge. But if the account we are given of these features is not satisfying, as I have suggested, we do not have reason to abandon the natural construal of this evidence in favor of inner awareness. We would have to have independent reasons for rejecting it. To this end, Thomasson poses a dilemma for all inner awareness views, to motivate the search for alternatives. But I am not confident the dilemma is decisive. Here is how it runs.

Inner awareness views either make conscious mental states the *object* of such awareness or they do not. The second option seems to be a dead end. On the face of it, the linguistic and phenomenological evidence suggests that these states *are* objects of awareness; and if they are not objects, it is hard to see how this reading of the evidence helps with first-person knowledge either. I think Thomasson is right on the mark here. The first option, though—the sort of Aristotelian view favored by Brentano—avoids this problem: it insists that these mental states are objects of awareness. The difficulty it faces, according to Thomasson, is that it posits *two contents* that belong to the same mental state, in spite of their having different truth conditions, different objects, and possibly different directions of fit. It therefore threatens to collapse into a more familiar higher-order theory, according to which one mental state is aware of a *distinct* mental state. If so, then this second option fails to offer a distinct alternative to more run-of-the-mill higher order theories (to which one might have other objections).

But this threat should not move you unless you are committed to the view that mental states are individuated by their content. This is a widely-touted assumption. But it is hard to find an explicit argument for it. This much can readily be conceded: wherever there is a difference in content—or a difference in truth conditions, or objects, or direction of fit—there is a difference in the *type* of mental state involved. But it hardly follows from this that different *token* mental states are required as well. And there is no incompatibility in a single token state exemplifying two quite different types. What rules out the possibility, then, that my seeing that night is falling and my being aware that I am seeing this are exemplified by a single token state? That is, that my seeing has *both* a first-order content about my surroundings *and* a higher-order content about itself as well?

The only objection here seems to be that we would need *some other* criterion of individuation. But there are such. Mental states might be individuated in accordance with Davidson's theory of events, for example, or in accordance with Kim's; neither requires different tokens wherever there is a difference in content.<sup>4</sup> Further, if these states are also brain states, there might be specific physicalist criteria as well.<sup>5</sup> Thomasson objects that such considerations cannot be part of an *analysis* of consciousness. But they needn't be offered as part of the analysis. Both Aristotle and Brentano argue for a reflexive higher-order awareness independently on the basis of ordinary intuitions about awareness together with a regress argument. Suggestions about individuation are only brought in later to answer the objection that they are incompatible with the individuation criteria of mental states. They are certainly incompatible with *one account* of such criteria, as Brentano rightly noted; but they are not incompatible with others. To establish this, it is sufficient just to show that there are other options available; so unless they are all unacceptable, this objection doesn't yet pose a threat, but at most a cost, in so far as one is forced to realign one's other commitments. And how much of a cost that is remains to be seen. For if the task of analysis is to do justice to our intuitions, this approach is still a welcome one: I have more confidence, at any rate, in my intuitions about my awareness of my own mental states than I do about criteria of individuation.

## References

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## Notes

1. “Once we understand this experience as meaningfully presenting there as being a world that is a certain way ... we can *subject it* to both a reductive and a hypostatizing pleonastic *transformation ...*” (emphasis added)
2. “The fact that these transformations are so trivial, and *available to anyone who possesses the relevant concepts to apply to their first-order experience*, is what seems to justify us in saying that we are always ‘aware of’ our experiences in the sense that we can immediately know or report on their presence if asked.” (emphasis added)
3. That this is what Thomasson has in mind by ‘conceptual transformation’ seems clear to me in the following claims. “In reductive transformations, the appropriate *use* of the initial sentence ... fulfills the truth-conditions of the latter sentence...” And again: “These reductive transformations are licensed by the conceptual connections between the *use or performance* of the original meaningful conscious act and the conditions of satisfaction for applying a term such as ‘appears’, which are guaranteed to be fulfilled given the original puddle-oriented experience.” (emphasis added)
4. For the details here, see my 2002, 782 n. 67.
5. See Kriegel 2003.