Final Report Summary - PHENOSELF (Understanding the Concept of Self as a Phenomenal Concept)

The project PHENOSELF bears on the semantics of the concept of self, and its implications for a range of issues relevant to the understanding of the self in philosophy, in psychology and in psychopathology.

What is meant here by “the concept of self” is not the highly abstract, general concept philosophers use to discuss, for instance, what it takes for a creature to be a ‘self’, or what preserves the identity of a particular self over time. What is at issue is, rather, the naïve concept that each of us uses to reflect on ourselves, deliberate on what we should do, and store information about ourselves. It is the concept at play, for instance, when I wonder whether I should join a camping trip, when I notice that I'm feeling lukewarm, when I go over my memories of the last holiday and ask myself whether I really had a good time, when I make the decision not to go and stay at home by myself.

The concept of self is a special kind of concept. It is the concept one uses not just to think about oneself, but to think about oneself as oneself. To see the difference, consider situations where one thinks of someone who happens to be oneself, without realising that that is the case. An illustration is Oedipus, as he thinks of the murderer of King Laius before he learns that he is the murderer. Before the revelation of his guilt, Oedipus does think of himself – that is, of the person he happens to be – but lacks a grasp of that person as himself. Thinking of oneself under the self-concept, on the other hand, guarantees that a subject is aware of herself as herself. This peculiarity of the self-concept goes hand in hand with a number of special semantic, epistemological, and psychological features which have drawn considerable attention from philosophers and psychologists.

Possessing the self-concept, and thus being capable of explicit self-representation, is arguably what makes a creature a fully-fledged self. The self-concept plays a central role in core aspects of our psychological life. Its mastery is what makes possible full-blown reflective thought, and, in its wake, competent linguistic self-reference using the word “I” and other first-person expressions; controlled introspection and reflective self-knowledge; the grasp of one’s continuing identity through time; moral deliberation; conscious action-planning and the higher forms of intentional agency, among other higher cognitive functions. Some of these functions can be impaired in some mental illnesses involving a disturbance in the sense of self, and anomalous uses of the self-concept. These include certain forms of psychosis or schizophrenia (characterised by the “alien thought” syndrome), or specific forms of severe depression with depersonalisation symptoms, sometimes taking a delusional form as in the rare, but life-threatening, Cotard syndrome.

The key PHENOSELF research question was: what is the semantics of the concept of self? In other words, what is the mechanism through which the concept latches on to the individual it refers to? The hope was that this mechanism, once identified, could illuminate some of the special features of the self-concept when it is used in normal cases, as well as some of the specific ways our mental life is derailed in pathological cases.

A powerful analogy with the word “I” has long suggested that the self-concept is a sort of ‘indexical’ representation. Indexicals are linguistic expressions, such as “I”, “you”, “here”, “now”, “that”, whose referent (the object in the world that they
represent) varies according to the context. For example, each occurrence of “I” stands for the person who happened to utter it. Indexicals have been extensively studied by linguists and philosophers of language. Recently, attempts have been made to apply the notion beyond the domain of language and into other, more basic domains of cognition (such as perception and action), where forms of mental indexicality – indexical concepts, instead of indexical words – are currently being explored.

The objective of PHENOSELF, however, was to develop an alternative approach, according to which the self-concept depends not so much on exploiting structural features of the context, but on a basic experience of self. The key hypothesis was that the concept of self is not an indexical concept, but rather, a special kind of phenomenal concept.

Phenomenal concepts – like red, peppery, sad or silky – are those we use to reflect on our experiences as such, and how they feel to us, rather than on the objects of which they are experiences. The way that phenomenal concepts work is that we concentrate on a certain subjective impression – for instance a certain sensation of pain – and use that impression itself to categorise any new instances of the same impression, in something like the way we might put a dab of red paint on the lid of a pot that contains more of the same paint. The subjective impression, so to speak, becomes its own label.

The main hypothesis of PHENOSELF is that the self-concept is interestingly akin to phenomenal concepts and works in a similar, although more complex, way. In particular, there is a kind of impression or experience, an experience of ‘me as myself’, that specifically triggers the application of the concept.

Investigating the nature of the relevant “self-experience” (sometimes called “me-ness” or “mineness” by philosophers and psychologists) constituted a large part of the work. Competing options were compared. In particular, the project involved studying the possible relations between the relevant self-experience and some forms of cognitive phenomenology involved in processing conceptual thoughts as they unfold, as well as more low-level experiences, including bodily awareness and the sense of bodily ownership, the sense of one’s own bodily movement, and the feeling of agency. One of the key results of the research was unearthing a widespread confusion between different concepts of what the “subjective character” of these and other experiences might consist in. Different corresponding variants of the proposed phenomenal-concept model of the self-concept were explored.

A second important aspect of the research consisted in exploring various philosophical implications of the proposed model. They included implications in epistemology, and implications for the status of selves and for associated questions in moral philosophy. Existing results concerning phenomenal knowledge were adapted to the case of self-knowledge to gain insights about first-person epistemology, including a novel account of a phenomenon known as “immunity to error through misidentification”. The project also included collaborative research on what grounds the special value we ascribe to ourselves, and why subjects care in a special way about what happens to them.

A third major component of the project was to contribute to the philosophical understanding of a range of mental illnesses affecting a subject’s sense of self. Based on the part of the project that aimed at conceptual clarification and resulted in a distinction between different notions of “subjective character” or a “sense of self”, a new description of the “alien thought” syndrome and of the Cotard delusion was proposed, which offers a principled way to distinguish these two clinical conditions affecting a subject’s sense of themselves.

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