

1000-Word P H I L O S O P H Y

AN INTRODUCTORY ANTHOLOGY

1000wordphilosophy.com/2023/02/15/self-knowledge/

Self-Knowledge: Knowing Your Own Mind

Author: Benjamin Winokur

Categories: [Epistemology](#), [Philosophy of Mind and Language](#)

Word Count: 998

One night you are considering dinner options. After scratching your itchy arm, you decide on sushi.

Do you *know* that you are considering dinner, are itchy, or want sushi? If so, how?

Having *self-knowledge* of these mental states requires having true and justified beliefs about them.^[1]

But self-knowledge seems to have additional, special features. First, we usually know our own mental states *better* than others know them.^[2] Second, we usually come to know them in *different ways* than how others come to know them:^[3] unlike how we learn about other peoples' mental states, we don't usually engage in self-*observation* or *hypothesizing* about what we ourselves are thinking, feeling, and the like.^[4]

How do we come to possess self-knowledge of this special sort?^[5] This essay surveys some influential answers.

1. The Value of Self-Knowledge

To begin, let's think about why having self-knowledge would be important.

First, suppose that you usually know your mental states better than others do. If so, you will usually have control over when and where you reveal your mental activity to others:^[6] e.g., if you dislike your job, your being in a better position to know this than your boss means that you can keep this feeling hidden from them.

Does it also matter that you know yourself *differently* from how others know you? Yes, at least if the special way in which you know yourself is part of *why* you know yourself best. If your boss

cannot know your feelings in the same way that you know them, and if this way of knowing your feelings is generally more accurate than your boss's ways of knowing them, then your boss won't generally be as knowledgeable about your feelings as you are.^[7]

2. Introspective Self-Knowledge

What, then, is the source of self-knowledge?

Perhaps self-knowledge is unique because it comes from *introspection*—a kind of “looking inward.” One theory of introspection is that each of us possesses a special mechanism or ability to “scan” and thereby reveal our own mental states to ourselves.^[8]

This ability is sometimes called “inner sense.” Inner sense is supposed to be far more reliable than “outer” senses, like hearing or sight, that give us knowledge of other people's minds. It explains why we know ourselves both better and differently from how others know us.

One concern, however, is that the inner sense is a highly speculative capacity, unlike our mechanisms for hearing, seeing, and the rest, each of which we know to exist. If we really have an inner sense capacity, we don't know where it is located or how it works.^[9]

Worse still, without a clearer understanding of how inner sense works, we cannot be sure that it is more reliable than our outer senses.^[10] Inner sense may exist, and it may be more reliable than our outer senses, but that's disputable.

3. Extrospective Self-Knowledge

Whereas introspection is a matter of looking inward,^[11] *extrospection* is a matter of looking *outward* in order to know your mind: e.g., to know whether *you believe* that the sky is blue, you can focus on whether *the sky is blue*.^[12] If your answer is *yes*, then this is what you believe, and you can self-attribute this belief. You gain self-knowledge through extrospection by thinking about *the sky* rather than about *yourself*.

Extrospection seems exceptionally reliable since, even if your belief about the sky were false, it would still be *your belief*, which means that you are correct in attributing it to yourself. Furthermore, if another person answers *yes* to “Is the sky blue?”, this does not reliably tell them what *you* believe. These points suggest that extrospection provides a better and different route to self-knowledge than to knowledge of others' minds. This account does not require us to

propose the existence of inner sense mechanisms either.

One issue is that focusing on the outside world seems useless in some cases, such as for gaining self-knowledge of your tickles and pains. These sensations seem entirely “inner,” unlike beliefs or other mental states that are about the outside world. Extrospection may sometimes explain what is better and different about self-knowledge as compared to other-knowledge, but it may not do so for every case.^[13]

4. Self-Knowledge for Free

Perhaps self-knowledge is not based on introspection, extrospection, or *any* mediating process or mechanism. In other words, perhaps there is no real difference between knowing what is on your mind and *being* in that state of mind:^[14] e.g., maybe part of what it is to *feel* hunger is to be *aware* of your hunger sensations, and that part of what it is to *intend* to go shopping is to *know* that you intend to do this.

If this is true, then self-knowledge is very different from knowledge of others’ minds, since others are never immediately aware of your mental states. Moreover, if it is in the very nature of your mental states that you are aware of them, then self-ignorance is out of the question, which ensures that you know yourself better than others know you.

However, the idea that you are never mistaken about your mental states is implausible. Suppose you notice yourself acting harshly toward a friend. Is this driven by jealousy or tough love? The reflection process may not be easy; you may even end up self-deceived. And imagine someone who cries out “It hurts!” before the dentist’s drill even touches their mouth. Presumably, they are just *afraid*, not hurt.^[15]

Good explanations of self-knowledge should leave room for occasional self-ignorance. The present explanation may fare poorly in this regard.

5. Conclusion

Here we have assumed that the best explanation of our special self-knowledge should explain *all* cases of it. Some philosophers, however, argue that some explanations explain some cases, and other explanations explain other cases, so putting complementary explanations together may explain all cases.^[16]

Alternatively, the inadequacy of each account might lead to skepticism about the uniqueness of self-knowledge. If the skeptics are right, then perhaps we cannot claim that self-knowledge plays such a valuable role in our lives.^[17]

Notes

[1] This is, at least, a standard view, considerations about Gettier’s (1963) concerns for the ‘justified true belief’ account of knowledge notwithstanding: see [The Gettier Problem and the Definition of Knowledge](#) by Andrew Chapman. Some philosophers, like Campbell 2018, prefer to see self-knowledge as an *ability* that does not require having belief about yourself.

[2] Various other labels for this have been proposed. Perhaps most frequent is the label of “privileged access” to denote the special reliability of self-knowledge. For further discussion and references, see Byrne (2018, sect. 1.3.2).

[3] Just as different labels for ‘better’ self-knowledge have been proposed, different labels for ‘different’ self-knowledge have been proposed as well. For instance, many philosophers describe self-knowledge as ‘peculiar’ insofar as it seems to have a different source than knowledge of other minds (and, indeed, our knowledge of the world more generally). For further discussion and references, see Byrne (2018, sect. 1.3.3).

[4] I follow Eric Marcus (2021) in using the labels ‘better’ and ‘different’ here, despite alternative possibilities as indicated in notes 2 and 3.

[5] For two long-form surveys of how we acquire self-knowledge so well and so uniquely, see Gertler (2011) and Coliva (2016).

[6] Peterson (2021, p. 4) calls this “epistemic control”.

[7] For further discussion of the importance of such self-knowledge, see Shoemaker (1996), Burge (1996), Nguyen (2015), Sorgiovanni (2019), Peterson (2021), and Winokur (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, and forthcoming).

[8] Perhaps this is a literal ‘inner eye’, or perhaps it is a mechanism that has its basis somewhere in the architecture of the brain. For further discussion, see Armstrong (1968) and Lycan (1996).

[9] For both further defenses and criticisms of the inner sense account, see Byrne (2018). For further

criticisms see, e.g., Burge (1996) and Shoemaker (1996b).

[10] Shoemaker (1996) has argued at length that there could never be an agent, with normal rational abilities, that never knows her mental states better and differently than others know them.

[11] Fernández (2003) coined the term 'extrospection', though the idea of extrospection is described by Evans (1982).

[12] See Byrne (2018) for the most detailed, systematic treatment of how we move from thinking about the world to thinking about ourselves in this extrospective way.

[13] Byrne (2018) does attempt to extend his extrospective account to self-knowledge of all sorts of mental states, though his arguments have met with significant resistance. See, e.g., Bar-On and Johnson (2019).

[14] This view is often referred to as "constitutivism" about self-knowledge, because it is the idea that one's mental states are constituted by one's awareness of them. Some proponents of this view include Shoemaker (1996a), Bilgrami (2006), Coliva (2016), and Marcus (2021). Notably, constitutivists do not always claim that *all* of our mental states are self-known by nature.

[15] This case is adapted from Locke (1967) and Barz (2018). See Bar-On (2004, p. 8) for a similar case.

[16] See Boyle (2009) and Coliva (2016) for arguments that we should be pluralists about the sources of privileged and peculiar self-knowledge.

[17] See Cassam (2014) for an elaboration of skepticism in this domain. For an earlier proponent of skepticism, see Ryle (2009 [1949]). Notably, Bilgrami (2006) and Coliva (2016, ch. 8) have sought to show that, while self-knowledge *can* require no mediating mechanism, this is not *always* the case. So, self-ignorance is possible some of the time, because sometimes we must use a process or mechanism to gain self-knowledge, and we can go wrong in the application of this process or mechanism.

References

Armstrong, David. (1968). *A Materialist Theory of Mind*. Routledge.

Bar-On, Dorit and Johnson, Drew. (2019). "Epistemological Disjunctivism: Perception, Expression, and Self-Knowledge," In *New Issues in*

Epistemological Disjunctivism, eds. Casey Doyle, Joe Milburn, and Duncan Pritchard, London: Routledge, pp. 317-344.

Barz, Wolfgang. (2018). "Is There Anything to the Authority Thesis?" *Journal of Philosophical Research* 43: 125-143.

Bilgrami, Akeel. (2006). *Self-Knowledge and Resentment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Boyle, Matthew. (2009). "Two Kinds of Self-Knowledge," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78(1): 133-164.

Burge, Tyler. (1996). "Our Entitlement to Self-Knowledge," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 96(1): 1-26.

Byrne, Alex. (2018). *Transparency and Self-Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Campbell, Lucy. (2018). "Self-Knowledge, Belief, Ability (and Agency?)," *Philosophical Explorations* 21(3): 333-349.

Carruthers, P. (2011). *The Opacity of Mind: An Integrative Theory of Self-Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cassam, Q. (2014). *Self-Knowledge for Humans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Coliva, A. (2016). *The Varieties of Self-Knowledge*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Descartes, René. (1984 [1641]). "Meditations on First Philosophy," In John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, tr. and ed., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume II*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-6.

Evans, Gareth. (1982). *Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fernández, Jordi. (2003). "Privileged Access Naturalized," *Philosophical Quarterly* 53(212): 352-372.

Gertler, Brie. (2011). *Self-Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Kind, Amy. (2003). "Shoemaker, Self-Blindness and Moore's Paradox," *Philosophical Quarterly* 53(210): 39-48.

Locke, Don. (1967 [2015]). *Perception and Our Knowledge of the External World*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Lycan, William. (1996). *Consciousness and Experience*. MIT Press.

Marcus, Eric. (2021). *Belief, Inference, and the Self-Conscious Mind*. Oxford University Press.

McKinsey, Michael. (1991). "Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access," *Analysis* 51(1): 9–16.

Nguyen, A. Minh. (2015). "What Good is Self-Knowledge?" *Journal of Philosophical Research* 40: 137-154.

Parrott, Matthew. (2017). "Self-Blindness and Self-Knowledge," *Philosophers' Imprint* 17(16): 1-22.

Peterson, Jared. (2021). "The Value of Privileged Access," *European Journal of Philosophy* 29(2): 365-378.

Ryle, Gilbert. (1949 [2009]). *The Concept of Mind*. London and New York: Routledge.

Shoemaker, Sydney. (1996a). *The First-Person Perspective and Other Essays*. Cambridge University Press.

— (1996b). *Self-Knowledge and Inner Sense*. Lectures I-III, in Shoemaker S. (1996a), 201-268.

Siewert, Charles. (2003). "Self-Knowledge and Rationality: Shoemaker on Self-Blindness," In *Privileged Access: Philosophical Accounts of Self-Knowledge*, ed. Brie Gertler, United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing, pp. 131-143.

Silins, Nico. (2012). "Judgement as a Guide to Belief," In *Introspection and Consciousness*, eds. Derek Smithies and Dan Stoljar, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 295-327.

Sorgiovanni, Ben. (2019). "The Agential Point of View," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 100(2): 549-572.

Winokur, Ben. (2021a). "Critical Reasoning and the Inferential Transparency Method." *Res Philosophica* 98(1): 23-42.

— (2021b). "Inference and Self-Knowledge." *Logos & Episteme* 12(1): 77-98.

— (2021c). "Davidson, First-Person Authority, and Direct Self-Knowledge." *Synthese*, 199(5-6): 13421-13440.

— (Forthcoming). Self-Knowledge and Interpersonal Reasoning. *Dialectica*.

Related Essays

[Epistemology, or Theory of Knowledge](#) by Thomas Metcalf

[Semantic Externalism](#) by Rachel Bourbaki

[The Extended Mind](#) by Rachel Bourbaki

["I Think, Therefore I am": Descartes on the Foundations of Knowledge](#) by Charles Miceli

[The Gettier Problem and the Definition of Knowledge](#) by Andrew Chapman

[The Epistemology of Disagreement](#) by John Matheson

About the Author

Benjamin Winokur is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Ashoka University. He received his Ph.D. from York University in 2021. His interests span across epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and applied ethics (especially technology ethics). He has published articles about self-knowledge, self-expression, the nature of reasoning, metaethics, and the epistemology of social media. BenWinokur.com

Follow 1000-Word Philosophy on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) and subscribe to receive email notifications of new essays at 1000WordPhilosophy.com.