

Stephen Langfur's

Philosophy Meets the Infant

1. Introducing the You-I Event

The question that goaded me into philosophy has been asked in many ways—for instance, by Peggy Lee in a song entitled: “Is that all there is?” The question implies an expectation of more.

What is missing, I will argue, is a kind of connection to other people that we had as infants. I will reconstruct it and show how we lost it. Unconsciously, a yearning for it persists, finding indirect expression in work, love, dreams, art, conversation, ethics, politics, and religion.

The lost connection may be described quite simply: by attending to me, other people make me aware of my existence and keep me so. No you, no I.

The idea appears to be contradicted by experience: each of us is self-aware when alone! But experience after infancy is not the last word. Its authority is shaken by a paradox.

The paradox of self-awareness

Think of a camera snapping a photo of a tree. Now suppose that in the very moment of snapping, the camera’s mechanism makes a photo of itself snapping the photo, tree included. Is such a camera conceivable? Probably not, but consider the self. When I perceive a tree, I am also aware of myself perceiving it. This self-awareness is often dim. I can intensify it by switching the focus of attention from the tree to myself. In

doing so, I am reflecting on myself. Ordinarily, however, self-awareness requires no special act of reflection. In being aware of anything, I am aware of myself being aware of it.

When we try to understand self-awareness, we come up against a paradox: how can the self, as *object* of awareness, be the *subject* that is aware of it? Immanuel Kant deemed this puzzle “impossible to explain, although it is an undoubted fact...” (Kant 2002, 362). Sigmund Freud put the problem as follows:

We wish to make the ego the matter of our enquiry, our very own ego. But is that possible? After all, the ego is in its very essence a subject; how can it be made into an object? Well, there is no doubt that it can be. The ego can take itself as an object, can treat itself like other objects, can observe itself, criticize itself, and do Heaven knows what with itself. In this, one part of the ego is setting itself over against the rest.

(Freud 1964, 58)

Freud sidesteps the puzzle. “The ego can take itself as an object,” but does “itself as an object” include its *being aware*? No, *being aware* belongs exclusively to the subject. If I try taking distance on myself to get a view of myself as aware, presto! a new *I* has arisen—the one who took distance. To view this new *I*, I must take distance again, and so on forever. It seems that I can never quite be aware of myself as aware. And yet I am, even in the simple act of perceiving a tree.

Our models of awareness are based on our experiences. The model of subject and object collapses under the fact of self-awareness. That may lead us to suspect that there is something wrong with the model—or worse, with the experiences.

Martin Heidegger, a century ago, showed the deficiency of the subject-object model *and* of the experiences on which it is based. After quoting the passage from Kant on the “undoubted fact,” he proposed that “the Dasein” (his term for a human being, which I will explain in Chapter 5) “never finds itself otherwise than in the things themselves, and in fact in those things that daily surround it...” (Never otherwise. Not, for example, by viewing itself as an object.) “[R]ather, as the Dasein gives itself over immediately and passionately to the world itself, its own self is reflected to it from things” (Heidegger 1988, 159).

Although Heidegger does not say so, the first “thing” to which a human being “gives itself over immediately and passionately” is another human being. This fact will be our clue for solving the paradox of self-awareness.

Solution: The You-I Event

From the age of 4 months, babies distinguish between things they can reach and things they cannot. To do so, they must have “a sense of self not only as differentiated...but also as situated in relation to what the environment affords for action....” (Rochat 2009, 96). What has made them self-aware so early?

Let us suppose that an even younger baby has yet to become self-aware. Imagine her experience during reciprocal attention with a caregiver (henceforth *carer*). Any form of such attention will do, but for now let it be the most common and powerful: mutual gaze, which begins soon after birth (Farroni et al. 2002). The carer is gazing into the baby’s eyes and the baby is gazing back. What does the baby see?

You might think that the baby sees nothing but a bunch of sense impressions. If that were the case, how would she ever come to know that they are part of a person with a mind? (This is the so-called *other-minds problem*.) At 2 to 5 days after birth, however, when a schematic face first seems to look straight at a baby and then to shift its eyes, the baby’s eyes follow (Farroni et al. 2004).¹ It is as if the baby has a reaction like the one we have when we see someone peering into the sky: we assume the person is looking at something and feel a pull to look too. The tendency appears in the animals of many species: on seeing a head and eyes turn in this or that direction, theirs follow. In the cases of ravens, rooks, dogs, wolves, four species of monkey, and the great apes, if you gaze toward a thing that is hidden from them by a barrier, they will move around it to see what you are looking at. They know you are looking, and looking means looking *at something*.²

The trait makes evolutionary sense: Among prey and predator species, there is a survival advantage in seeing not just yellow discs but gazing eyes (there! among the reeds!). Apparently, natural selection solved the other-minds problem well before philosophers thought of it (Sloman and Chrisley 2003). I will say more about evolution in Chapter 2.

Armed with that much, we return to our question. Suppose that a baby has yet to become self-aware. The carer is gazing into the baby’s eyes and the baby is gazing back. What does the baby see?

The baby sees the carer *looking at something*. The baby cannot see this *something* but feels it. It is the manifestation of self.

That is the core of the argument, so let me dwell here a moment. At any age, I know what I am feeling without needing to perceive my face or gestures. This is a distinctive feature of my own self as compared to others (I *do* need to perceive their

¹ For this to work, the baby must see the motion of the pupils. Before trying it on your baby, read Hood, Willen, and Driver 1998. On pupil motion as a factor, see Astor, Thiele, and Gredebäck 2021.

² See the research-review by Zeiträg, Jensen, and Osvath 2022, 17. On great apes’ knowledge that another is looking, see Moll and Tomasello 2007.

behavior to sense what they feel). A sheer feeling, however, does not suffice to make me aware of myself: if we examine a feeling just as it occurs, nothing in it suggests the existence of an entity that is feeling it. During reciprocal attention, however, the carer's gaze does suggest the existence of an entity, a *something* she is looking at, and precisely where her gaze is focused a feeling is felt (perhaps several feelings at once: joy at being looked at, hunger, an itch). Voilà! the self.

Granted, there is more to self-awareness than that. We will see in Chapter 3 that the awareness of oneself as embodied, active, and continuous also comes about through interactions with a carer. The implication is radical: Unlike a Cartesian subject ("I think, therefore I am"), I depend on others for awareness of my existence. You attend, therefore I am.

This dispels the paradox. In self-awareness, the object is not myself. If we insist on the terminology of subject and object, *you* are the object (nothing paradoxical about that!). Ordinarily, however, in speaking of an object, we mean an item that appears to a pre-existing subject—which is not the case here. You are present as attending, I am co-present as the target of that attending. I am one end of a loop. The event of becoming self-aware through another's attending will be termed a *You-I Event*.³

Someone objects: "Your answer may dispel the paradox for infants, but the rest of us undergo no such event and are perfectly self-aware." Later in this chapter, and more fully in Chapter 4, I will argue that the You-I Event is the main source of self-awareness after infancy too—with a twist.

There are numerous questions and objections, which will be taken up as we proceed. Here is one: "Many nonhuman animals are self-aware. Do they experience You-I Events?" I see no reason to deny the Event to animals engaging in reciprocal attention. Yet many have an alternative source, whether in addition or instead. We will see in Chapter 10 that self-locomotion can produce self-awareness. This cannot be the main solution for humans, though. As said, we are self-aware by the age of 4 months, before we can crawl.

I asked us to imagine, for starters, a very young baby who is not self-aware. But can more be said about her age at the time of the first You-I Event?

One study suggests that reciprocal attention already occurs between the mother-to-be and the fetus, with touch as the principal medium (Marx and Nagy 2015; see also the Appendix, Challenge 1). I have chosen to start with postnatal self-awareness because the research is abundant. In either case, the recurring You-I loop is decisive. For the self is not a substance; it cannot exist on its own, but must constantly be recreated, whether in the womb, in infancy, or later.

³ This You-I account has developed in the course of five articles: Langfur 2013; 2014; 2016; 2019; 2023.

Second, mutual gaze while breastfeeding has been found at 3 days, although by the age of 1 month it lasts longer (Lavelli and Poli 1998). Eva Simms writes:

Newborn eyes can see the perfect distance of twelve inches: the bull's eye of the breast's aureole and the maternal face. Infants love to gaze at their mothers, a gaze that is one with the rhythm of breathing, sucking, and swallowing....

(Simms 2008, 14)

If some have doubts about those earlier ages, we can be confident that the You-I Event occurs by the infant's 8th week. At this age, when the carer mirrors the baby's expressions, the baby coos and smiles (Murray et al. 2016). Here is an excerpt from the maternal diary of infancy researcher Vasudevi Reddy:

Shamini: 7 weeks, 5 days: It feels...I can *make* her smile whenever I want—almost whatever mood she's in (not a frenzy or a raging hunger though!). Today for example—she's (in the beginning stages of) crying—she's looking off to the side—while I'm changing her. I take my attention away from the nappy and talk to her and smile (i.e., I make one burst of...effort to catch her attention); she turns to me—mouth pulled down, crying stops for a few seconds, she smiles quiveringly, then grumbles/complains (rather than cries) with mouth down, still looking into my eyes.

(Reddy 2008, 101)

By this age, surely, if not before, Shamini perceives her mother as more than a packet of sense impressions. She sees her as looking, smiling, and vocalizing—with herself as the target.

Here is another objection: “The You-I account entails an absurdity: when you-the-carer turn your attention elsewhere, I-the-baby must cease to exist for myself!” We will see in Chapter 3 that by my 3rd month, the items that are present during our exchanges continue to be *associated* with you after you have turned away or left the room. Supported by the associations, the memory of you attending and the hope of your return preserve a form of self-awareness. Lacking, to be sure, is the *something* which your attending made present. It too persists as a memory and a hope. The emptiness created by memory and hope can be filled, in part, by *effects* I make on things, which in some ways resemble your responses.

That softens the absurdity, but I do not want to soften it much. With all due respect to associations, memory, and hope, if you-the-carer are absent longer than a certain time, a switch occurs. The associated things then keep you present as *not* attending to me, and I become aware of myself as *not attended to*. It is the negative You-I Event. I sense the possibility of not being.

Nicholas of Cusa said to God: “And if You were to withdraw Your countenance from me, I would not at all continue to exist” (Hopkins 1985, 685). Ultimately, the same is

true for a baby in relation to a carer.

With the words *not being* and *existence*, we enter a region where philosophy and infancy meet. The meeting has been long in coming, for the simple reason that philosophers, like everyone else, do not remember what life was like before they could speak. Since the 1970s, however, new ways of posing questions to babies, aided by new technologies, have made the first two years more accessible (Stern 1985, 38–42).

The counterfeit You-I Event

This book hinges on two ideas. The first is the account just given, which I will defend in Chapters 2 and 3: the main path to the I must loop through a You. But that is quite far from the kind of self-awareness adults know. Here the second idea comes in: You-I Events are the source of self-awareness after infancy too, but *in a counterfeit mode*. I analyze this mode briefly now and more fully in Chapter 4.

Evolutionary factors have resulted in babies who take joy in You-I Events (see Chapter 2). However, the intervals between Events are tinged with *dread of separation* (Bowlby 1960). Once I-the-child can speak, I am able to quell this dread. For I can talk to myself like you-the-carer while hearing as me.

For example, after her father has put her to bed and left the room, 2-year-old Emily repeats, in his intonation, things he said to her minutes before, including “Big kids like Emmy don’t cry” (Dore 1989, 231ff). By the close imitation that language makes possible, I-the-child can play your part toward myself as an actor plays a character. Thus I feel attended to as if by you. The result is a sense of self. It is a thin version of the original, since the speaker is not really you, as I well know. The bestowal of this thinner self is entirely in my power, and so the suspense of the You-I Event is missing. Furthermore, in playing you toward myself I *pretend* that there is space between “us.” The pretend-space is the first mental interior.

Self-talk comes in many forms and functions, but in this book, except when a broader sense is specified, the term means playing the part of another person talking or listening to me. When the talk becomes inaudible to others (often in the early school years), we may call it *inner speech* (Duncan and Tarulli 2009). The played other will not save me from alligators, but it saves me from depending on real others for awareness that I exist. That is why inner speech “is reassuringly or irritatingly *there on tap*.... It offers us the unflinching if ambiguous company of a guest who does not plan to leave” (Riley 2004, 58).

Since self-talk is entirely up to me, we may term its result *the secure self*. I-the-child, -

adolescent, and -adult play certain people toward myself so often that “they” become habitual inner companions. Philosopher Allan Køster writes: “[W]e develop a habituated felt sense of concrete others as part of embodied selfhood” (2021, 57, 60). They are, in the words of Charles Fernyhough, “the people we carry with us” (2016, 32). I will term them *mock others*—*mock* as in simulated.

Mock others and the secure self together form a composite: the *subject*. (“Cogito ergo sum” is self-talk, reassuring me of my existence.) Flesh-and-blood others, no longer needed for self-awareness, are among the subject’s *objects*. The subject is like a solar system, with the secure self in the center, surrounded by mock others who attend to it, all moving together as a unit through a universe of objects.⁴

Mock others do not just speak or listen to me. They also attend with me in silence to things outside our loop. Their attention is modeled on the *joint attention* that occurs when people attend simultaneously to a third thing *and* each other, as attested by quick reciprocal smiles or glances. For example, when a carer and a 12-month-old play with a toy, attention is no longer like a spotlight on a single entity, but more like a bath of light encompassing three. I-the-baby see the thing, I am aware of you seeing it, and I am aware of you aware of me seeing it. When you turn away from me toward it, I still feel attended to.

In a similar way, a mock other can attend with me to a third thing without lessening attention to me. When I enjoy the breeze, my mock others enjoy it with me. When I run from the avalanche, I appeal to them (“Mother!”). When I perceive a tree, they are quietly or noisily with me, attending to it and me. In its relation to objects, the subject has a joint-attentional structure.

This inner structure enables a new answer—a post-infancy answer—to the paradox with which we began: how can the self, as *object* of awareness, be the *subject* that is aware of it? Just as a carer and baby remain attentive to each other while jointly attending to a toy, mock others and I remain attentive to each other while jointly attending to things outside our inner loop. The result is the dim, proto-reflective, secure self-awareness of everyday life after infancy. To sharpen it by an act of reflection, I re-enliven my playing of the other, breaking through the automaticity of habit, and observe myself from that mock point of view while continuing to look at the tree. This act of reflection is experienced as stepping back and examining oneself, but the position one steps back to is familiar: it is the position of a mock other. The act is performed in pretend space, which has become an integral part of the space in which one lives.

After I-the-child have mastered self-talk, suppose you re-enter the room. You do not appear in your former power as bestower of self-awareness. No one does or can. I have usurped your power by playing you toward myself. Because of the greater

⁴ If this derivation of the subject is correct, we should avoid the term *intersubjectivity* for the period prior to self-talk.

security it affords, self-talk is always out ahead, *precluding* the potential You in each encounter. The original kind of human connection goes into eclipse.

Self-talk restructures experience. The gains are immense: By the age of three years, separation anxiety eases; playing you-the-carer toward myself, I can regulate myself as you would; I can take multiple perspectives; I can begin the process of joining the larger social group, adopting its norms and values; I can carry the culture in my head (Tomasello 2019, 153). These developments are rightly extolled—they are part of becoming human—but we must note a negative aspect: in self-talk, one loses the fully important other and the self that is her gift. Life is safer, life is duller. There remains a yearning for what has been lost, but it is stymied by dread of reverting to absolute dependence.

The yearning and dread are excluded from awareness because of the change in structure: as a subject relating to objects, I cannot switch back to an altogether different way of being. We may speak, therefore, of a *split-off self* that yearns for the You-I Event while dreading it. Hence an occasional restlessness, which leads us to seek out avatars of the You. Hence too the homesickness that motivates a certain kind of philosophy. In answer to Peggy Lee's question, the world after self-talk is not all there is.

The rest of the book

This chapter has outlined the basic argument of the You-I account. In the remaining chapters of Part One, I will present empirical evidence to support these ideas.

In Part Two, Chapters 5–9, I trace the unconscious yearning for the Event. The fields of love, dream, work, art, and conversation are *openings* through which the yearning for a You steals into the structure created by self-talk.

In Chapter 10 of Part Three, I evaluate other attempts to explain self-awareness, including those by J. J. Gibson, Edmund Husserl, and Dan Zahavi. In Chapter 11, I apply the You-I account to the question of free will; in Chapter 12, to morality; in Chapter 13, to faith in a benevolent, omniscient, omnipotent God.

The You-I Event is not rare for a baby. To explain why it becomes so, I point to self-talk. But when its rarity is explained in this way, it seems impossible to attain. For who can expel the mock others that roost in our rafters, chattering away or silently looking on? Chapter 14 discusses what can be done.

In an Appendix, I consider objections to the You-I account from various fields, including autism research, theory of mind, multicultural studies, and research on inner speech.

Cogitor ergo sum. I am thought of, therefore I am.

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