The ontological consistency of consciousness in classical thought

Juan José Sanguineti
Pontifical University of the Holy Cross

1. Introduction

The notion of consciousness, as many other fundamental concepts, can be used in different senses in the field of philosophy and cognitive sciences, including neuroscience. It is related to notions as knowledge, awareness, first person perspective, reflexion, intentionality, ownness, selfhood. In this speech I would like to consider the ontological approach of consciousness typical of classical philosophers, particularly Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

In current philosophical debates the problem of consciousness is often set up in a mainly epistemological framework. It is viewed, for example, as a special kind of knowledge, or perhaps as knowledge as such, related to a content (I am conscious of something), and belonging as well to a subject or a mind (I am conscious). The content may be a psychic alteration (I have a pain) or an operation (I see, I think), or in another sense an object, usually called the intentional object (I see the river, I understand an idea). There is a frequent oscillation in these discussions between psychology and objective science, or in other words between consciousness as a psychical and subjective state, on the one side, and consciousness referred to the objective knowledge present to the conscious mind, on the other side.

Two items are at play in this framework, firstly the self and its operations (or its states), and secondly the objects of the self’s operations. Several problems emerge from this issue, for example, the difficulty to understand the self (the “I”) as an object, or the doubtful necessity of going back from the object to the conscious mind, since in science it might seem sufficient to deal with objects, and the introduction of consciousness or subjectivity in this account could be considered an unnecessary psychological move. From this point there could follow the project of “naturalizing” consciousness, which in practice means to reduce it to the physical objective domain (eliminating the first-person approach). But this move would be still another turn of the aforementioned oscillation between psychology and objective science, or in plain words between subject and object.

In this speech I will argue that consciousness in the classical metaphysical thought is understood as a strong form of being, meaning “self-possession”. This approach is “metaphysical” because consciousness is considered here in relationship with the realm of being. The problem does not emerge from an act of introspection in opposition to the natural world, which tends to create the drastic dualism between mind and body, but it rather arises from an ontological question: what kind of being is to be conscious? It is not my aim, anyway, here to deal with a historical problem, but rather theoretical, though I’ll get insight from elements of the classical thought.

I will proceed to display the topic in two steps: firstly, I will remain at the level of operations; secondly, I will go to the major issue, i.e. the meaning not only of “being conscious”, but mainly of “being self-conscious”.

2. Feeling and understanding our own actions

According to Aristotle, senses like sight or hearing deal with sensible objects of the external world, and at the same time the operations of seeing, hearing, smelling, etc. can be felt by the sentient subject through the “common sense” (common to the five external senses in a higher level: see Aristotle, De Anima, III, 425 b 12-27; De Somno, 455 b 2-8; 456 b 9-13). In other words, there can be sensations referred to the external objects (illuminated things, sounds produced in the environment), and there are sensations as well concerning the psychological operations of feeling or perceiving things. We can call this perception or sensation of the sensitive operations sensible consciousness, though this is not an Aristotelian terminology. The reason for postulating self-sensation is empirical, since it seems obvious that we don’t only intellectually know we see, or hear, but that we also perceive or feel when we see well or badly, or when we don’t perceive at all, and even animals react
in a certain way, for example, in the case of hearing or seeing disturbing objects, which is a perception of the sensitive operation as a certain alteration of the sentient body¹.

The Aristotelian account of the sensible consciousness seems somewhat narrow. The whole body in its movements, parts and functions, is felt by the subject, either an animal or a human person (proprioception, interoception, etc.), so it is natural that the intentional operations (like seeing, or smelling) should be co-perceived at a certain degree by the sentient subject. The “more material” senses (touching, taste, and in some way smelling) refer both to the qualities of external bodies and to the alterations of our own body (while touching an object, we feel our hand or finger in its act of touching). The different channels of information constituted by the external senses are unified in the perception of external objects. This perception is associated with the self-perception of our own body. Every sensation of our bodily activities (including the act of perceiving things) is always placed in the context of the perception of our body in action. We can conclude that the perception of the external world is inseparable from the perception of our body as a passive subject receiving inputs from the outside and also as an active subject that can manipulate the external things of the world. Consciousness and intentionality are mutually linked.

Aristotle acknowledged the possibility of a complete self-consciousness in the case of thought or pure understanding, that can be grasped by itself as such, which he attributed to God (noésis noéseos: *Metaphysics*, XII, 1074 b 36). While perceiving that we see or hear can be said a second-order operation, “thinking that we think” means that the operation can be the object of itself through a kind of “complete reflection”, rather than going to “another object” different from the very operation. Neoplatonics called this activity epistrofē, which was translated into Latin as reditio or conversio (change of direction, turning back, conversion).

Cognitive operations normally have an object. The direction to the object in contemporary philosophy is called intentionality. If this object is existent and is really different from the knower, the intentional cognitive movement can be said transcendent, rather than purely immanent. Now to be conscious means to know or to perceive one’s own operations or actions, just as seeing, walking, working or whatever. If these actions are known by the agent, they are conscious operations, and otherwise they are unconscious. But there can be several aspects to be aware of in our own actions; regarding the moral qualities of our actions, we speak of “moral conscience”. Conscience, or consciousness, was already a popular word in the Hellenistic culture, called sineídesis, and was employed by St. Paul in his *Letter to the Romans* 2, 15 in a moral sense which became standard in Christian authors.

At the level of operations, consciousness according to the classical thought appears secondarily. The first movement of cognitive operations is directed towards external physical objects grasped by the senses. In a second movement, or even simultaneously, but conditioned by external objects, the knower can reflect upon his or her operations. We read in Thomas Aquinas: “the object is what is primarily known by the human intellect; secondarily, it is known the act through which the object is known, and through this act it is known the very intellect”² (*S. Th*. I, q. 87, a. 3).

Hence, the possibility of reflection (a complete self-reflection) emerges from a knower which is initially turned to the objects of the physical world. In a kind of second movement, the knower goes from the outside to the inside, i.e. reflects upon his acts and discovers his interior life, without thereby abandoning the exterior world neither the “external” side of his bodily condition. As I said, even the sensitive consciousness means the self-perception of the body. But the intellectual self-comprehension is a perception — not a feeling — that we are knowing or understanding something.

There’s no production of an infinity chain here, since the intellect “perceives that understands” (Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, I, q. 87, ad. 1) in its very act, “understands that understands” (Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 2, c), “it is capable to understand its own understanding” (Thomas

¹ For an Aristotelian account of consciousness, see Sihvola (2007).
² Aquinas’ translations are mine.
Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, IV, 11, n. 3465, perceives therefore its own existence (see Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 8, ad 1).

Self-understanding our own actions through an intellectual perception is an existential experience previous to conceptual abstraction trying to know deeply the nature of things. We know that we think and exist without knowing exactly what does it mean to think and to exist, just as we know and understand material things previously to any scientific account of them. “Someone perceives (percipit) to have a soul, to live and to exist, insofar as perceives that feels and understands, or that exercises this lively acts” (Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 8). Similarly, “we perceive that we will in the very act of willing” (Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th., I-II*, q. 112, a. 5, ad 1).

Now, since understanding means the capacity of judging the truth or the goodness of an action or an event, self-understanding implies the capacity of self-judging the validity of our own actions to the extent that these actions are guided by our judgments. In other words, if I can judge my judgments, I can freely guide my rational behaviour, with the possibility of self-correcting my choices. A complete self-consciousness is, in this sense, the root of free will. To be self-conscious means to be self-guided, though the possibility of judging badly arises from the possibility of judging not according to the truth and the good. Again in Thomas Aquinas: “Those who freely judge are those who can move themselves according to their judgment. But in order to be able to judge its very act of judging, a faculty needs to be able to reflect upon itself. If the faculty needs to judge itself, it must know its judgment. This is characteristic of intelligence. Irrational animals are free in a certain sense only regarding their movements and acts, but they have no free judgment” (*Summa contra Gentiles*, II, 48, n. 1243).

Going back to Aristotle, there is another remarkable aspect of consciousness highlighted in his ethical writings. Let me follow his words accompanied by Aquinas’s commentary, which makes easier the understanding of the Aristotelian thought. Anticipating in some way the Cartesian *cogito*, but in a different sense, Aristotle/Aquinas argue that the self-perception of our feelings and thoughts is equivalent to the self-perception of our own intellectual existence and life. Therefore, self-perception, in feelings and thoughts, is the highest way in which humans can live and exist. It is not mere living, but “good-living”, which means that it is extremely enjoyable. In other words, living, and feeling and understanding of what we live, is the source of a profound pleasure (for Aristotle, pleasure ultimately means enjoying life). “By feeling our feeling, and understanding our understanding, we feel and understand our own existence, and it was asserted earlier that being and living means for man mainly feeling and understanding (…) To feel that anybody is living pertains to the agreeable things. As it was shown before, living is naturally good. Therefore, feeling that we exist in a good way is utmost pleasant” (Thomas Aquinas, *In IX Ethic.*, lect. 11, n. 1908, corresponding to Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 1170 a 30 - b 5, and *Eudemian Ethics*, 1244 b 25-35, 1245 a 5-10).

Self-consciousness means, then, to know the truth about ourselves. This truth is linked to what Scholastics called the “transcendental good”. To be self-conscious according to the truth of what we really are, hence, means to attain the best of our possibilities, which implies to “exist in the best way”. The perception or feeling of what is good is, by definition, enjoyable, since according to the classical philosophers as Aristotle and Aquinas pleasure or joyfulness arises from the perception of our own existence and actions as something intrinsically good. But to appreciate something as a good means to love it.

In this kind of “metaphysical theorem”, we arrive now to the unexpected conclusion that self-consciousness, provided its linkage to the truth of ourselves, is enjoyable and therefore means self-love. Existential knowledge or “perceptual knowledge” cannot be separated from an emotional (classically “appetitive”) appraisal of what is good or bad in the object which is known. Therefore, to perceive one’s life is inseparable from loving and enjoying one’s life, which means, unfortunately, that the self-perception of something wrong or bad in ourselves purports suffering and hatred.

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3 Aristotle uses the terms *aisthesis* and *noēin* and Aquinas the corresponding terms *sentire* and *intelligere* for what we translate as “feeling” and “understanding”.

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This Aristotelian conclusion is understandable inasmuch as we consider knowledge as life and not purely as producing conclusions, something that could be done by machines, we could say in modern terms. It is not enough to know. We need to know that we know, otherwise our knowledge wouldn’t be our own life and our operations could be replaced by any other subject. The subject would be irrelevant. The following Aristotelian remarkable passage stresses the importance of the first-person approach. “To perceive and to know oneself is the thing most desirable for each one (…) if somebody should isolate knowledge, abstracting it from life (…) there wouldn’t be any difference between the fact of knowing ourselves or anybody else, but this would be like living another one instead of living myself” (Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics, 1244 b 25-30).4

Surprisingly, Aristotle discusses this problem in his treatise about friendship. No wonder that, according to the principle that a person possessing many goods but no friends is less happy than a person sharing his or her goods with friends, the conclusion is that a solitary self-consciousness and self-love are not desirable at all and that they are a cause of distress (see The Nicomachean Ethics, IX, 1169-1170). The extraordinary Aristotelian conclusion is that, if living is perceiving, feeling and understanding oneself, then the utmost desirable life is to co-perceive, co-feel and co-understand with a friend, that is to say, with another “self” (állos autos: Eudemian Ethics, VII, 1245 a 30) who reciprocally co-perceives, co-feels and co-understands together with us. “It is manifest that life is perception and knowledge, and that consequently social life is perception and knowledge in common” (Eudemian Ethics, VII, 1244 b 25). This translation in some way trivializes the principle. Aristotle is rather saying that co-perceiving and co-understanding, i.e. to perceive and to understand together, is a form of life. He is clearly suggesting (see Eudemian Ethics, VII, 1244-1245) that these operations, if the other person is a friend, which means perceiving him or her as “another self”, constitute a nobler act of self-perception and self-knowledge, and a higher way of living than being solitary self-conscious and self-loving. Conscious friendship is then a higher mode of being self-conscious. “To perceive and to know a friend, therefore, is necessarily in a manner to perceive and in a manner to know oneself” (Eudemian Ethics, VII, 1245 a 35).

Let us sum up the points already considered in the following remarks:

1. Aristotle acknowledged the possibility of feeling and knowing our own sensations and lively operations. This kind of knowledge is called consciousness. According to Aquinas, self-knowledge is complete in the act of self-understanding. Since this act goes back to its very starting point, it is accomplished as a complete reversal over itself, which can be called reflection. Human reflection, however, is not absolute, since we actually begin knowing external sensible objects. The awareness of knowing these objects allows us to perceive our own intellectual operations.

2. Self-consciousness does not attain only our own operations and actions, but also our existence as living subjects, which includes the self-perception of our own body as a part of our living subjectivity. In this sense, we can say that self-consciousness regards our self, i.e. our existence as subjects, in other words our “I” or our “person” as such (by definition, a bodily person is a living being capable of having self-consciousness when reaching a normal developed physical condition).

3. Self-consciousness does not mean an existential closure. According to some Aristotelian hints, the cognitive approach contained in friendship, wherein the other subject is seen as another self within a mutual recognition, implies an increased reciprocal self-consciousness5.

4. The existential consciousness (opposed to an abstract grasping of oneself), if complete and true, is associated to self-love and enjoyment. This kind of self-consciousness is fully accomplished only in friendship and not in a solitary way.

3. Self-consciousness as the highest way of being

I started this speech contrasting the epistemological approach of many modern discussions about consciousness with the metaphysical concern typical of classical thought. The contemporary

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4 The translation is mine.
5 Comparisons with Hegel’s account of self-consciousness are tempting, but I will avoid this point, too wide to be developed in this place.
biological account of this feature of our human condition, partially shared with animals, could converge, in my view, with this ontological perspective which I propose to reconsider in our inquiry on consciousness. I allude to biology because, as we have already seen, consciousness in Aristotle and Aquinas (but also in many other classical philosophers, like Plato, Plotinus, or Augustine) is fundamentally viewed as a special way of living: to live in the way of being conscious. There is no frontal opposition, therefore, between being and knowing. It’s not, as usually posed, that being is only the object of knowledge, though this latter point is equally true. More than that, being, and living as well, in a very special way, means being conscious, living consciously.

The appearance of something like a “self” in the world corresponds to life. Indeed, life was traditionally understood as self-movement for a purpose, i.e. a teleological self-movement⁶. This self-movement is not pure and simple spontaneity, but includes self-control in a variety of situations (today we would say “information control”). In life the purpose or goal is the maintenance and expansion of life in itself and not something outside its scope. In more precise words we could say, then, that life is characterized by self-movement (self-organization, self-regulation, self-adaptation) for the sake of life (life instantiated in individual units or in each biological species). The living being can be said a “self” in the sense that its identity is preserved as a “value” that deserves to be defended against endogenous and exogenous dangers and that needs to be developed and built in the form of a structured and mature organism.

The reflexive linguistic term self (autós, seipsum) indicates an effort to express this kind of movement or action displayed not from something towards something different (let us say from A to B, which is no-A), without any identity, but as a sort of movement that enriches “in itself” the self-moving subject (let us say, going from A onto “more A”) throughout a process of development and differentiation, and trough a multiplicity of operations. The maintenance of this identity (the self, the subject) is not logical, but dynamical, vital, and can be called immanence. In Greek terms, we can say that this movement is not pure kinesis, but rather energeia (“immanent act”), or even praxis (action, operation). Subjectivity and agency appear for the first time in nature in living beings. So a living being, in the Aristotelian account of life, is a unit that in some way (not absolutely) arises from itself (A from A itself), a fact which is compatible with being generated from another unit, or from different previous situations (in evolution). Moreover, the living unit operates in favour of itself (A for the sake of A).

At this point I will rely upon the Thomistic principle of the “increasing immanence” as a characterization of the degrees of life. The principle —let me call it in this way— is proposed in the fourth book of the Summa contra Gentiles: “the higher the nature, the more immanent whatever flows from it” (C. G., IV, c. 11).⁷ This apparently “innocent” and rather abstract principle means in Aquinas’ mind nothing less that living beings will be ontologically higher according to the increasing degree of immanence of their vital operations. We can easily foresee that in this sense self-consciousness will amount to be the upmost degree of life, and of course of being as such. I cannot hereby present in its details this Thomistic chapter, too complicated to be analyzed, but for the purpose of this exposition I’ll simply go to the essential points of the issue.

Animal life adds to the organic life the new quality of perceiving and feeling it. Animals perceive and feel the self-motions of their body, and at a certain degree they use the self-perception of their body acting in an environment in order to control their intentional movements. Perceiving and feeling is not yet self-consciousness, but it is clearly a new way of being a living body. What is the difference between having a hand and feeling a hand? Why we assume that the latter is better? Can we

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⁶ According to Aquinas, a living being is a substance capable of self-moving: see Thomas Aquinas, In II De Anima, lect. 1, n. 219; lect. 5, n. 285; Sanguinetti (2009). In one of the best definitions of life I ever found, we read in Aquinas that “living beings are those beings which move themselves in their actions (viventia sunt quae seipsa movent ad agendum)”: C. G., IV, c. 11. This characterization contains implicitly the idea of “teleological” self-movement.

⁷ “Quanto aliqua natura est altior, tanto id quod ex ea emanat, magis ei est intimum”.

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explain what is characteristic of sensible consciousness, since “feeling a hand” is to be conscious (not intellectually) of my hand? What kind of relation have I with my hand when I say that I see it, or touch it, or feel its movements, perhaps painfully? I don’t intend here to answer these questions, but only to help reflection on the quality of feeling and perceiving, ultimately the quality of knowing. When we know the physical thing A, the object A is raised up to a higher level of being, yet keeping its own identity and without detriment to its intentional relationship.

Furthermore, sensible knowledge is open not only to the own body but also to other things in the environment. We use the word perception for the sensible notice of physical things that we can see, hear, touch, etc. We prefer to use feeling for the self-perception of our body and our actions, even for the operations of “perceiving” external things (which we don’t “feel” in a first-person approach). Hence “feeling” indicates the sensitive consciousness, without thereby depriving it from their intentional objects. The two kind of actions (perceptions and feelings) are intertwined (perceptions are felt, while feelings include perceptions), but what is essential in the animal sensitive consciousness is the presence of its lively self, that very “self” which is characteristic of living beings, but now “possessed” in the sense that it consists in a self-perceiving and self-feeling self open to the world in an intentional way8.

Self-consciousness, in the specific sense applied only to humans, is self-understanding. To understand (noēin, intelligere) means in the classical view to attain the existence as such of something whose essence we can more or less grasp and analyze through an operation called “abstraction”. To understand a thing or an event and not simply to perceive it through the senses (to see it, to feel it) is, first of all, an intentional (not physical) appropriation of its nature9. “Knowing beings are different from non-knowing beings because the latter possess only their own form, while those who know are able to possess also the form of other things” (Thomas Aquinas, S. Th., I. q. 14, a. 1, c; De Veritate, q. 2, a. 2, c).

This intellectual capacity, applied to the very knower through reflection, as we saw in the first part of this exposition, is self-consciousness in a strong sense, which then means to “possess” oneself in the sense of getting to what we really are. Now this intellectual self-possession is not intentional, since it is not referred to something else different from the knower. It is a total self-reflection through which we know our identity as “our self as such”, i.e. our own existence as a subjective existence (which is expressed in the pronoun I). Unexpectedly, the intellectual self-knowing is different from intellectually knowing other things, since it is a kind of existential self-perception, quite different, on the other hand, from the feeling of the body as a whole, though including it (my body).

Self-consciousness, in a minimal sense, is the continuous awareness that we are living and existent persons10. It is based upon consciousness in the sense of being awake and not sleeping (sensitive consciousness), but it adds to it our normal self-comprehension as persons. The person is the human self, whether or not is in a state of consciousness, although it is endowed with the potentiality of intellectual and existential self-consciousness (“I am, I exist, I will, I think”)11, even if this potentiality is not developed or it is damaged.

The qualities of self-consciousness can be regarded from a psychological or from a more metaphysical perspective. Some aspects I am here indicating are more developed in modern philosophy or in sciences such as psychology or neuropsychology, but they are compatible with the central ontological features of classical philosophy assigned to self-consciousness and outlined in this speech. I use the term “consciousness” in the sense of sensitive consciousness or simply as conscious

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8 For a biological concept of self, see Northoff and Panksepp (2008).
9 In a second sense, to understand is to know the meaning of a symbol. But primarily is to know (in some degree) ‘what is something’ and not merely to know the meaning of a word.
10 See in n. 2 in the previous section our definition of person. In the same section I reported some Aquinas’ quotations which acknowledge a real perception of non-physical objects like our intellect, our will, our existence, our soul.
11 For these topics, see Fabro (2006); Gallagher and Shear (1999); Bennett and Hacker (2007, 331-334).
intellectual knowledge, opposed to “unconscious”, and I employ the word “self-consciousness” as “intellectual awareness of our personal existence”. Now I am mostly referring to self-consciousness.

Firstly, psychologically and phenomenologically we can say\(^\text{12}\):

1. Self-consciousness is not closed, but open to the world. In other words, its consistency as an immanent unit (something turning upon itself) is compatible with its transcendence conceived as a “knowing relationship” referred to the existence of real things.

2. It is continuous, not being properly a single operation, but rather a permanent cognitive state (a habit, in the Aristotelian sense) underlying every concrete cognitional operation directed towards the world or to any other object. Of course, self-consciousness, tied to memory, undergoes processes of more or less attention and can be “disactivated” in sleeping or fainting.

3. Self-consciousness is normally implicit. It becomes explicit in language or in scientific and philosophical research (as we are doing now). This latter process can be called objectifying (producing a concept or an idea)\(^\text{13}\). But the object, in its content, looses the subject, since it is not an act, let alone a lively operation (the idea of “myself” is not myself)\(^\text{14}\). However, the object (the well-known third-person approach) is always the object of a thinking subject. Through intentional objects (“objective thoughts”) we attain real existing things or events, whether external or internal. Our self-objectifying acts regarding events of our personal past constitutes our narrative self. Objective self-reflection is an endless process, ever open to more comprehensive views, intended to make us more and more aware of the truth and value of ourselves (in different senses: psychological, social, but specially moral and religious)\(^\text{15}\). Anyway, self-reflection presupposes the habitual self-awareness, which properly cannot be reduced to an object. In other words, our self-objectifying operations should be brought back to our existential self-awareness.

4. Consciousness and self-consciousness are materially grounded on brain circuits concerning cognitive and affective states and operations. Brain integrations operated by neural circuits cover psychosomatic associations regarding different aspects of consciousness\(^\text{16}\). Neural dynamisms and networks constitute the neural dimension of psychosomatic operations and states, since they provide the causal physical basis for the intellectual correlated functions\(^\text{17}\). These functions can be related to special areas of the brain, though self-consciousness as such should be seen rather distributed in several coordinated brain activations. Neural activity explains the existence of unconscious mental states and the possibility of the emergence of the “conscious screen” of the human mind.

I turn now my attention to the ontological features of self-consciousness according to Thomas Aquinas. I’ll just highlight two points: 1) self-consciousness as ontological consistency, or a “being” in a strong sense; 2) self-consciousness within interpersonal relationships. These aspects may seem controversial, since they are very metaphysical. The first one is plainly present in Aquinas. The second one, in my view, can be considered as rather heuristic.


\(^{13}\) Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between a perceptual existential self-consciousness and a rational and theoretical elaboration concerning the human self: see S. Th., I, q. 87, a. 1; C. G., II, c. 75, n. 1556; De Veritate, q. 10, a. 8.

\(^{14}\) See Polo (1984 and 1985).

\(^{15}\) The distinctions between primary consciousness and higher order consciousness (Edelman 1989; Edelman and Tononi 2002), and core and extended consciousness (Damasio 1999) can be placed within this array of phenomenological features of consciousness. Obviously, these distinctions imply different meanings of the term “unconscious”, and can be also helpful for more precise specifications in the description of pathologies of consciousness, and in the topic of the altered states of consciousness as well.

\(^{16}\) For an account concerning the relationship between human mind and brain, see Sanguineti (2007), and Sanguineti, Acerbi, Lombo (2011).

\(^{17}\) For the topic of the neural basis of consciousness, see Koch (2004), Tononi and Koch (2008), and Tononi (2008).
I. Intelligible identity and complete reflection: the way to immateriality. I started these considerations pointing to the dynamic identity of the living being. Its self-preserving unity becomes a real subject, an “immanent identity” emerging over the pure passing by of material flowing things (enérgēia surpassing kínesis). Now human thought, according to Aristotle and Aquinas, understands physical things getting to their nature (what they really are) through an abstract “essence”, which remains fixed and identical and thereby preserved from the passage of time. As philosophers know, Plato believed that there was a realm constituted by absolute intelligible forms over and beyond the physical flowing things. In an Aristotelian account, instead, these forms (intentional objects of thought) are conceived as present to a mind, since intelligibility refers to some intelligence, and similarly a thought requires a thinker. This mind is, obviously, the human abstracting intelligence\(^{18}\).

The object which is thought can be anything in the world\(^{19}\), overcoming material existence (as a thought), and even if it is as such not real (but in normal cases intentionally referring to real things), it is contained, as an object, “inside” the living being which is the human mind. If this is true, then our mind should be immaterial, due to the proportion between thought and thinker, which intentionally are “identical”. We could call this immateriality a kind of “ontological consistency”, emerging from the flux of matter, though present as an act in our bodily structure.

But what has to do this point with self-consciousness, which is our topic? The answer to this question, I daresay, follows the line of the aforementioned principle of “increasing immanence”. The object which is thought (symbolically, think of the object A) is consciously thought (no doubt, several dimensions of our mind are unconscious, for example the storage of knowledge in our memory). Hence, the subject thinking or understanding, when thinking consciously, should be self-conscious, otherwise the object which is thought would be present to nobody, and our act of thinking would amount to the total oblivion of ourselves. This last point, anyway, is intuitive: whenever we think of any object, we are habitually self-conscious. The object which is thought is inseparable from the thinking subject.

Aquinas touches this issue when commenting the rather awkward Aristotelian assertion that “in those things that are without matter, the thinker and the thought are the same” (De Anima, III, 430, a 2-5). The meaning of this statement seems to presuppose immateriality, which in Aristotle’s mind implies full actuality (removal of material potentiality), as a condition for the intellectual identification between the knower and the object which is known\(^{20}\). But the quoted proposition could also mean that if an entity is immaterial, it will be self-understanding (and of course understanding)\(^{21}\).

Whatever the phrase may signify, we are clearly going in the direction of self-consciousness, which means a self completely reflecting upon itself, whether this subject may include the presence of objects or not\(^{22}\). Since we are dealing with the intellectual apprehension of being, we are compelled to conclude that the highest way of being is self-understanding, and that any kind of intellectual knowledge, i.e. the comprehension of beings and objects, should include some self-comprehension\(^{23}\).

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\(^{18}\) To be honest, I am presenting a personal interpretation of Aquinas and Aristotle, without claiming to make a historical account. Nonetheless, I do claim that my account truly corresponds to the Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy.

\(^{19}\) See Aristotle, De Anima, III, 431 b 20 (our intellect intentionally identified with the totality of beings), and Thomas Aquinas, De Veritate, q. 2, a. 2, c.

\(^{20}\) See Thomas Aquinas, S. Th., I, q. 55, a. 1, ad 2; q. 87, a. 1, ad 3; De Veritate, q. 2, a. 2, c.

\(^{21}\) Aquinas explicitly states that “if there should be an intelligible form subsistent on its own, among the general kind of intelligible things, this form would be self-understanding”: S. Th., I, q. 56, a. 1, c.

\(^{22}\) However, the presence of objects implies a dependence, i.e. an imperfect self-consciousness: see Thomas Aquinas, In X Metaph., lect. 11, n. 2617-2621; S. Th., I, q. 56, a. 1.

\(^{23}\) The ontological identity between voīs, vōesis and voetón is a fundamental tenet in Plotinus’s metaphysics: see Ennead V, 3, 5 (also V, 1, 4; V, 3, 4), in Plotinus (1984), and A. G. Vigo, Intelecto, pensamiento y conocimiento de sí. La estructura de la autoconciencia en Plotino (V 3) (1999).
On discussing this point, Aquinas in several places recalls a famous *dictum* contained in the *Liber de Causis*: “anyone knowing his own essence comes back to it operating a complete return upon himself (*reditione completa*)”. This *epistrofé* is epistemological but at the same time ontological. The expression “coming back to the own essence” means, in Aquinas’ reading, that insofar as this immanent self-understanding is complete or independent, the intelligence accomplishing the *reditio* will be independent or capable of existing on its own. But independence does not mean isolation or separation. An absolute *reditio* (in a metaphorical sense) can be attributed only to God. In humans, the *reditio* is interpreted by Aquinas as the “circular” rational process (*discursus, quidam circuitus*) of going first to the objects and afterwards, by way of reflection, goes back to our interior operations and self. But the habitual self-consciousness is ever present in any human conscious operation as an indispensable platform for the self-knowledge of our own person.

II. **Self-consciousness within interpersonal relationships.** In the first section of this paper I reported the Aristotelian remarks in his two *Ethics* concerning the higher perfection of co-feeling and co-understanding in friendship. Since a person regards his friend as “another self” and conversely (a perfect friendship is reciprocal), we can speak of “self-consciousness” inside friendship as more perfect, and richer in its immanence, than an isolated self-consciousness presumably self-sufficient. This point could be developed in many aspects (think of topics like recognition, love, joy, self-donation, social and familiar issues, relationship with God). Here I cannot but make a minimal and conclusive hint about its potential richness. This theoretical development should include the relevance of gratuity (friendship for the sake of communication, and not only for need) and the importance of personal identity in the deep cognitive and affective relationship with the other “self”: a mutual union maintaining personal distinctions, otherwise the self would vanish in the relation with the other person.

Friendship, in its genuine sense, means knowing and appreciating the other as “another myself”. This is much more than simply recognising the other as an “I” equal to me. True friendly love is like an appropriation of another self as a part of myself and conversely. This fact entails a mutually shared self-consciousness, a form of “common” unity in plurality which is actualized in each cognitive and affective interaction.

Suggestions for an ontological view of these points come, in my view, from the Christian Trinitarian doctrine. The principle of the “increasing immanence” is argued by Aquinas in a theological chapter (C. G., IV, c. 11) in order to illustrate how the primitive biological manifestations of immanence are somewhat the first steps of what in God as a Trinity is fully realized, precisely in the “processions” constitutive of self-knowledge and self-love “taking place” in the interior of the divine Life.

To conclude, I hold that the topic of self-consciousness, displayed in an ontological perspective, helps to better understand both being, the human person and even God. Our self-consciousness, which

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24 “Omens sciens essentiam suam, est rediens ad essentiam suam reditione completa”: Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 2, 26th objection and ad 2; *In Liber de Causis*, propositio 15. *Liber de Causis* is an anonymous medieval Islamic writing belonging to Neo-Platonic circles and inspired in Proclus’ work *Elements of Theology* (see Proclus, 1987, propositions 15-17).

25 See this topic in Murillo (1998).

26 “The return to the own essence in the book De Causis means but the self-subsistence of the thing”: Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2.

27 Indeed, Aquinas states in *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2, that a perfect independent being as God can be anyway “influentially” present in finite things, for their own ontological perfection, without thereby loosing its identity. In a different sense, Thomas holds both the metaphysical consistency of the human intellectual soul as capable of being independent, and its “ensouling” character of being essentially the substantial act of matter in the human body (see S. Th., I, q. 75).


is a crucial aspect of our personal self, enables us to know other persons. It has to be developed and brought into unity in many senses. It is finite, therefore not completely transparent neither self-sufficient, and for this reason it needs a transcendent foundation. But if there is a kind of friendship between man and God, then our self-consciousness will attain in this relationship its ontological accomplishment.

References
Vigo, A. 1999. *Intelecto, pensamiento y conocimiento de sí. La estructura de la autoconciencia en Plotino (V 3).* “Acta Philosophica” 8: 45-68.