

Unifying Colombetti's and Geninas's distinctions in pre-reflective self-awareness

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Introduction

Contemporary discussions in phenomenology maintain a distinction between pre-reflective self-awareness and reflective self-awareness. Recently, some researchers have attempted to divide pre-reflective self-awareness further down into different varieties. In this paper I compare two such attempts: by Giovanna Colombetti who distinguishes foreground and background feelings in pre-reflective bodily self-awareness and by Saulius Geniusas who distinguishes split self-awareness in lucid dreaming and a displaced self-awareness in non-lucid dreaming, as different modes of pre-reflective self-awareness. I will argue that the different kinds of pre-reflective self-awareness that Colombetti and Geniusas identify, rest on a similar distinction, namely a centering of consciousness closer or further away from the body. This could provide a start for a unified account on the multiplicity of pre-reflective self-awareness in further research. In the first section I will introduce Colombetti's paper, in the second section I will introduce Geniusas' research and in the third I will compare them and argue for my thesis.

Colombetti's distinction of foreground and background bodily feelings

In her paper *Varieties of Pre-Reflective Self-Awareness: Foreground and Background Bodily Feelings in Emotion Experience*, Colombetti describes two kinds of feelings that arise during emotion: background bodily feelings and foreground bodily feelings (2011). Foreground feelings are obvious bodily feelings like a knot in the throat when expressing sadness or the stomach contracting in disgust. These kinds of bodily feelings are acute and attract the attention of the person who experiences them. Background feelings, on the contrary, are not obvious. These are bodily feelings that are subtly felt. The attention is typically focused on something else instead of the body. For example, in a stressful situation the body might be tense and this adds to the overall quality of the experience, but the person in question is not very aware of this bodily feeling.

After describing the differences between foreground and background feelings, Colombetti turns to their connection with pre-reflective and reflective bodily self-awareness. Reflective bodily self-awareness is understood as an intellectual relating to the body, in a way of analysis. For example, one might think "oh my head is hurting, I forgot to drink enough water today". Foreground feelings are often associated with reflective bodily awareness, because they attract

attention and thereby easily become an object for reflection. However, it does not always have to be that way. We can experience foreground feelings in our body, in the moment, being attentive to it, without taking the reflective stance and starting to analyze them (Colombetti 2011, 304-306). Colombetti's conclusion is thus that both background and foreground bodily feelings can be part of pre-reflective bodily self-awareness. The difference between them being the degree of their presence in experience.

In the last part of her paper, Colombetti focuses on the notion of absorption and argues that being in flow or immersed in an activity, does not necessarily mean that the body is pushed back to the background in experience. In many activities where the body is engaged, like playing an instrument or dancing, the body is actually very present in experience and felt in the foreground. To illustrate this, Colombetti quotes David Sudnow's first-personal account on improvising jazz on the piano. He described the experience as a submission to the body: it felt like the "I" was being replaced by his hands and he was "singing" with his fingers (Sudnow 1978 cited in Colombetti 2011, 308). This shifting of attention (and the displacement of the "I" in experience), is responsible for putting bodily feelings more to the foreground, and has, as we will later see, some similarities with Geniusas account.

Before proceeding to the next author, I want to remark that it is important to keep in mind that Colombetti speaks here about *bodily* pre-reflective self-awareness specifically. This is different from just pre-reflective self-awareness, as defined by for example Dan Zahavi. Traditionally, pre-reflective self-awareness refers to the feeling of "mineness" that is accompanied with every experience: an implicit knowing that this experience is only given to me and no one else. Zahavi stresses that "me", the subject of experience, is hereby not really something that exists apart from the experience (Gallager and Zahavi 2021, 54). Colombetti adopts Zahavi's definition of pre-reflective self-awareness as mineness, but also the definition of Dorothee Legrand where the body is taken to be the subject of experience (Legrand 2007 cited in Colombetti 2011, 303).

Geniusas' distinction of split self-awareness and displaced self-awareness

In his paper *Modes of Self-Awareness: Perception, Dreams, Memory*, Geniusas distinguishes multiple modes of pre-reflective self-awareness that can be found across perception, dreaming and remembering. At the start of his paper, Geniusas lays out his presuppositions. He describes pre-reflective self-awareness as the "egological dimension of experience" and also adopts

Zahavi's term 'minimal self' which he calls "the ego understood as the subject of experience" (2022, 153). In line with Zahavi, this ego is not an ontological entity, but merely the feeling of mineness that is characteristic to all experience. Geniusas also connects the notion of minimal self with what Edmund Husserl (the father of phenomenology) described as "the centering point of consciousness" (2022, 154).

Genusas specifies that it is one thing to maintain that each and every experience is accompanied with a sense of mineness (pre-reflective self-awareness) and another to maintain that "the mineness characteristic of all my experiences refers to the same ego, which remains numerically identical throughout the streaming" (2022, 154). Here we already see the theoretical nuance, on which his distinctions of pre-reflective self-awareness are based. Although all experience has a minimal self (pre-reflective self-awareness), depending on if you are perceiving or dreaming, for example, this minimal self can refer to different egos.

To illustrate this distinction, Geniusas presents in his paper a letter exchange between Jean Hering and Husserl, where they discuss the topic of lucid dreaming. Hering tells Husserl that he had a dream where he was walking with his friends, when suddenly he became aware of the fact that he was dreaming and started to explain to his dream-friends that they were not real. They would not believe him, however. Husserl then responded that it is important to keep in mind that the *dreaming ego* (the actual ego sleeping in the actual world) who became aware during the dream is not the same as the *dreamed ego* that was perceiving and walking around in the dreamworld and conversing with its dream-friends (Husserl 1994 cited in Geniusas 2022, 155-156).

Such splitting of the ego is characteristic of other presentifications as well, like imagining and remembering. The *actual ego* is imagining, and the *imagined ego* is perceiving the imagined world. Or, in episodic memory, the *actual* or *remembering ego* is remembering, and the *remembered ego* is perceiving. Dreaming, as well as imagining or remembering, could thus be qualified as *perceiving at a distance*, i.e. at a distance from the actual ego (Genusas 2022, 156). A similar insight was written down by Theodor Conrad, who characterizes dreams by a *displaced self-awareness* (Conrad 1968 cited in Geniusas 2022, 158). If we would translate this insight to Husserl's terms, we could say that there appears to be a second centering point of consciousness in these presentifications, displaced from the original centering point of consciousness, from which one perceives at a distance.

How does this split of consciousness lead to the conclusion that there are different modes of pre-reflective consciousness? In his paper, Geniusas also mentions another researcher, Nicolas de Warren, who also conceptualizes a distinction between two forms of pre-reflective self-awareness, in dreaming specifically: “pre-reflective awareness *in* the dream and pre-reflective awareness *that* I am dreaming” (de Warren 2012 cited in Geniusas 2022, 158). According to de Warren, in non-lucid dreaming the ego is experiencing the dreamworld, which, like all experience, is accompanied with a sense of mineness (the experience of the dreamworld is given to me and no one else). It, however, lacks the self-awareness that it is dreaming. In lucid dreaming, the ego is not only experiencing the dreamworld, it is also aware of the fact that it is dreaming. This additional awareness of dreaming is also accompanied by a sense of mineness (it is me who is dreaming), thus leading to a double sense of mineness.

Expanding on this and connecting it to the two egos, Geniusas stresses that in non-lucid dreaming the dreaming ego is completely absorbed in the belief that it is the dreamed ego, and therefore lacks the awareness of being in a dream. It fully identifies itself with the dreamed ego, and precisely therefore it is a displaced self-awareness. In lucid dreaming consciousness sees through this self-deception.

In a non-lucid dream, the dreaming ego is pre-reflectively self-aware in the dream, although not pre-reflectively aware that it is dreaming. By contrast, consciousness caught in a lucid dream is characterized by a split self-awareness: the dreaming ego is pre-reflectively aware of itself in the dream as well as pre-reflectively self-aware that it is dreaming. (Geniusas 2022, 159)

This split self-awareness does not occur in normal wakeful perceiving, according to Geniusas, because in wakeful perceiving there is only a *perceiving ego*. There is no *perceived ego*, in which the *perceiving ego* could immerse itself and start perceiving at a distance. This leads to the conclusion that normal wakeful perceiving is accompanied by a fundamental different mode of pre-reflective self-awareness than in dreaming where, due to a second centering point of consciousness, the ego can forget itself and identify itself with the displaced ego (Geniusas 2022, 161).

In short, Geniusas argues that experiences can be lived through from different egoic standpoints, which means that “not all mineness is my own” (Geniusas 2022, 167). Sometimes the mineness experienced is that of the dreamed ego, and not that of the actual ego, making this type of self-awareness displaced (or double, as split-consciousness, when the dreamer becomes lucid). Thus, different modes of pre-reflective self-awareness can be identified, which

nevertheless all presuppose a more basic pre-reflective self-awareness that characterizes all experiences.

Comparison

Prima facie, the two accounts seem to concern very different things: Colombetti is concerned with emotions and the body, while Geniusas speaks about dreaming and different perspectives of experience. Moreover, Colombetti takes the body as the subject of experience and as the minimal self, whereas Geniusas takes the ego to be the subject and minimal self in pre-reflective self-awareness. In addition, probably the biggest incompatibility of these accounts lies in the fact that Colombetti identifies two varieties of pre-reflective self-awareness *within* wakeful perceiving. Geniusas, in contrast, takes the egoic perspective of wakeful perceiving as *one mode* of pre-reflective self-awareness and even explicitly states that the other modes that he identified, the displaced or split-awareness in dreaming for example, cannot occur in normal wakeful perceiving.

These differences could mean that Colombetti and Geniusas work within different theoretical frameworks, with different definitions of pre-reflective self-awareness. Or, if their theoretical frameworks do line up, it could mean that pre-reflective self-awareness could be differentiated into different kinds across different dimensions. However, there still remain similar observations in both accounts, which I think, with a little reinterpretation, can bring the accounts pretty close to each other and even point to a similar distinction in pre-reflective self-awareness.

Firstly, although the body does not seem to play an important role in Geniusas' account, he does mention it. At some point he quotes yet another author who also noticed the double awareness present in lucid dreaming: "in the case of a lucid dream, we are faced with (...) a split sense of mineness that refers both to the dreaming and the dreamed ego, or as van Eeden puts it, to the simultaneous awareness of the action of the dream body and the restfulness of the physical body" (van Eeden 1969 cited in Geniusas 2022, 161). From this passage and its context, it seems that Geniusas has no problem with using 'awareness of body' and 'ego' interchangeably. Consequently, one could say that Geniusas' notion of minimal self that he mostly calls 'ego' and Colombetti's notion of minimal self that she calls 'bodily self-awareness', actually refer to the same structure of experience and that their theoretical frameworks do not necessarily clash with each other.

Secondly, both authors write about absorption or immersion. This act of identification or focusing of attention, plays a crucial role for both authors in terms of determining which mode of pre-reflective self-awareness one is experiencing. Colombetti takes the example of playing an instrument or dancing as an act of absorption where the body comes to the foreground in experience. Both of these activities revolve around movements of the body. However, she also briefly mentions music as something one could be absorbed in (Colombetti 2011, 298 and 309). Listening to music does not necessarily involve bodily movement, and I think most people will agree that in the experience of being absorbed in music, the bodily feelings actually move to the background of experience. In such a moment the identification of consciousness is more with the music rather than with the body. Thus, it is not only absorption that brings bodily feelings to the foreground, but it must also be an identification with the body and not with something else. Depending on where consciousness is focussed or centered, one experiences either background or foreground bodily feelings. The same centering of consciousness determines for Geniusas which pre-reflective self-awareness mode one is in, that is, the identification of consciousness with one ego rather than the other determines the difference.

In a way, one could describe the experience of being absorbed or identified with music, or anything outside of the body, as a displaced self-awareness. Or, using Husserl's terms, we could say that in the act of immersion the 'centering point of consciousness' shifts to what consciousness is absorbed in, be it the body or something else. This way Colombetti's distinction of background and foreground bodily feelings actually describes the difference of experience with different centering points of consciousness. Especially the nuance of identification-with, is very similar to what Geniusas describes in what happens in non-lucid dreaming. Just like Colombetti's example of the jazz player whose "I" surrenders to the body and starts to sing with his fingers, the actual ego disappears to the background in non-lucid dreaming, and consciousness, now identified with the dreaming body or ego, experiences the dreamworld from a displaced point of view. Thus, the distinction both Colombetti and Geniusas make, on which they base their variations of pre-reflection self-awareness on, are actually quite the same.

Yet, one could protest that Geniusas would still deny that Colombetti's distinction, which occurs in wakeful perceiving, is of the same kind as what he describes in dreaming. After all, wakeful perceiving is categorized among "presentations" in Husserlian phenomenology, opposed to "presentifications" such as dreaming and remembering, and only presentifications can have a displaced awareness or perceiving at a distance (Husserl 1991 cited in Geniusas

2022, 154). This presupposition is adopted by Geniusas without further explanation or questioning. There are, however, many reports of experiences in wakeful perception that could fit the description of displaced awareness and even perceiving at a distance, like for example out-of-body experiences some people report to have during meditation or during the use of psychedelics. This could be a reason to reconsider the distinction between presentations and presentifications.

In conclusion, I think the observations made by Colombetti and Geniusas are similar enough to say that the distinction they make is of the same kind and about the same phenomenon, namely the placement of the centering point of consciousness, either being closer to the actual body or further from it, which in turn determines the specific mode of pre-reflective self-awareness. However, these accounts do not easily compare because of differences in terminology and theoretical background. Further examination of the theoretical underpinnings of both accounts and a reconsideration of some presuppositions could start the development of an unified account on different modes of pre-reflective self-awareness.

Conclusion

Within contemporary literature on pre-reflective self-awareness a small group of researchers are making an attempt to define variations of pre-reflective self-awareness. In this paper I compared two such attempts, that of Colombetti and Geniusas, to find out if their distinctions line up with each other. Colombetti's paper focuses mostly on the point that bodily feelings are felt either subtly in the background or acutely in the foreground, and that both can be counted as part of pre-reflective bodily self-awareness. Less explicit in her paper, but nevertheless still described, is how attention and focus play a role in this distinction. When the mind is occupied with a certain situation that provokes an emotion, the bodily feelings are often in the background influencing the overall experience. On the other hand if one is absorbed in an action that requires bodily movement, bodily feelings come to the foreground.

Genusas' account initially seems to be concerned about very different phenomena. He describes and references different accounts on lucid dreaming where one becomes aware of the fact that they are dreaming. This lucidity leads to a split-consciousness or double self-awareness: one of walking around in a dreamworld and this experience being for one-self, the other being aware of the act of dreaming and having an actual body in the background that is sleeping. Dreaming is thus accompanied by one or two different modes of pre-reflective

awareness, either consciousness is centered and identified with the dreamed ego or it is split across both the dreamed and dreaming ego. In waking perception the centering point of consciousness coincides with the actual waking ego. From this analysis we can distill three modes of pre-reflective self-awareness: the first is the sense of mineness of the actual ego in normal perception, the second is a displaced self-awareness and sense of mineness by the dreamed ego in non-lucid dreaming, and the third is a double sense of mineness in lucid dreaming, where consciousness centers around two points: the actual ego and the displaced ego. Geniusas identifies more modes of pre-reflective self-awareness in remembering and imagination, but I left those out in this paper for the sake of brevity.

While comparing both accounts I concluded that both authors use the same notion of pre-reflective self-awareness that includes bodily awareness. They also both write about immersion, Colombetti uses for this the term 'absorption' and Geniusas uses the term 'identification'. Nevertheless, for both this placement of attention or centering of consciousness, either with the actual body or further away from it, determines the mode of pre-reflective self-awareness. Therefore, I argue that Colombetti and Geniusas base their varieties of minimal self-awareness on a similar distinction.

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