ALBERTO BARBIERI
Vita-Salute San Raffaele University
barbieri.alberto@unisr.it

GROUNDING OUR SENSE OF PERSONAL EXISTENCE: HOW NOT TO DO IT[1]

abstract

In contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, the sense of our personal existence that several classical philosophers have believed to permeate our experience is typically cashed out in terms of the ubiquity of our inner awareness of our own experience. In this paper, I address the issue of what grounds such an inner awareness, arguing against the widespread view that it obtains in virtue of a more fundamental awareness the occurrent experience has of itself. This is the state self-awareness view (SSV). Specifically, I argue that all versions of SSV are bedevilled by what I call the problem of state *awareness, that is, the problem of understanding why and how a mental state-level relation like state self-awareness could recover a subject-level relation like inner awareness. I also defend the depth of this problem by blocking a potential solution.*

keywords

sense of existence, inner awareness, for-me-ness, consciousness, state self-awareness view, self-representationalism

1 This paper was presented at the San Raffaele School of Philosophy 2024. I am grateful to all the participants for their engagement and observations. For thorough comments on a previous draft, I am especially grateful to Elisabetta Sacchi. I would also like to thank an anonymous referee of *Phenomenology and Mind* for their useful comments and remarks. This work has been supported by the PRIN Project 2022YXBJWX "Higher-order Perceivable Properties" (HOPP), funded by the European Union—Next Generation EU, Mission 4 Component 2 Investment 1.1, CUP D53D23009960008.

Phenomenology and Mind, n. 29 - 2025, pp. 68-79
DOI: 10.17454/pam-2907
https://www.rosenbergesellier.it/eng/journals/phenomenology-and-mind

ISSN 2280-7853 (print) - ISSN 2239-4028 (on line)

I did not know where I was, I did not even understand in the first moment who I was;
I had only, in its original simplicity, the sense of existence
as it may quiver in the depths of an animal (Proust, 1913/2003, p. 7).

1. Introduction

Individuals like you and me are conscious subjects, except when in a coma or dreamless sleep. They, thus, undergo experiences such as seeing, hearing, touching, feeling, and thinking. But, in experiencing, are human persons also invariably aware of their own existence? Does the phenomenology of human subjecthood display a constant, though elementary, sense of ourselves?

William James gave a positive answer to this query. "Whatever I may be thinking of," he claimed in his (1892/1985), "I am always at the same time more or less aware of myself, of my *personal* existence." (p. 43) Terminological dissimilarities notwithstanding, many other prominent historical figures in Western Philosophy appeared to share his viewpoint.[1]

In contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, the opposite attitude has long prevailed.[2] Recently, however, an ever-increasing number of scholars working on the nature of consciousness[3] have come to maintain that every conscious state involves the subject's inner awareness of its occurrence (e.g., Janzen, 2008; Kriegel, 2009b; Levine, 2001, 2006; Zahavi &

1 For instance, Locke famously wrote: "Experience then convinces us, that we have an intuitive knowledge of our own existence, and an internal infallible perception that we are. In every act of sensation, reasoning, or thinking, we are conscious to ourselves of our own being" (Locke, 1690/1997, Ch. 9 sec.3). In a similar vein, and with explicit reference to Locke's view, Leibniz claimed that "we know our own existence by intuition (Leibniz, 1765/1996, bk. IV, Ch. 9, sec. 2). See also, among others, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2010, p. 317).

2 The reason for such a prevalent attitude is debatable. Arguably, however, it has at least partially to do with the prominence that discussions in this area have given to the so-called transparency of experience and the elusiveness of the self. The transparency of experience, which is often tracked back to G. M. Moore (1903), is roughly the view that, when introspecting one's own experience, one can only be aware of features of externally located objects (cf. Harman, 1990; Tye, 1995). The elusiveness of the self, instead, goes back at least to Hume (1739/1975) and corresponds roughly to the view that, in introspection, one cannot be aware of oneself (cf. Howell, 2010; Ryle, 1949).

3 By consciousness here, I mean *phenomenal consciousness*, the property mental states have when, and only when they exhibit a so-called phenomenal character, that is, to put it in Nagel's (1973) famous expression, that "there is something it is like for their subject to be in them." Unless otherwise stated, I will use this meaning of consciousness throughout the paper. Correlatively, when I talk about conscious mental states—or experiences—I mean phenomenally conscious states, namely, states exhibiting a phenomenal character.

Kriegel, 2015).[4] This registers a certain turnaround towards the question at issue, for inner awareness can be understood as a way of shaping such a basic awareness of one's individual existence.[5] Furthermore, inner awareness has been understood in this way in the philosophical literature. For instance, Kriegel (2003, p. 13; 2009b, p. 49) explicitly read the aforementioned Jamesian remark in terms of inner awareness. In this paper, I shall endorse this interpretation, thereby focusing on the elementary sense of our existence *qua* the ever-present inner awareness we have of our conscious states.

Much of the current debate on inner awareness has centered around two main issues. The first issue concerns its existence: is inner awareness always involved in experience? The second concerns its (metaphysical) explanation: in virtue of what does inner awareness ultimately obtain? In what follows, I shall assume that inner awareness exists, focusing on the issue of its explanation. More precisely, my aim is to argue against a family of solutions to such an issue that has gained currency in the relevant literature and that, following Guillot (2017), I will group under the label of the "state self-awareness view." According to this view, roughly, what ultimately grounds inner awareness is that conscious states are aware of themselves.[6] I will contend that, in whatever way one understands it, state self-awareness is unsuited to ground inner awareness. Accordingly, one should look elsewhere for a satisfactory explanation of it.

Here is how I proceed. In section 2, I outline the state self-awareness view in more detail, expanding on its central tenet and briefly considering its main variants. In section 3, I will present the problem that afflicts all versions of the state self-awareness view. Finally, in section 4, I strengthen my case by considering and dismissing a possible way out of the problem.

The reader will not overlook the fact that the concern of the present paper stands primarily within the debate on the metaphysics of consciousness. However, it is worth emphasizing that it is also highly relevant for the philosophical discussions on personal identity, as inner awareness repeatedly enters these discussions. For instance, it is widely held that a certain degree of self-consciousness is essential to personhood (cf. Garrett, 1998).[7] Accordingly, if we regard the awareness of one's own existence as the most basic form of self-consciousness one can display (cf. Di Francesco, Marraffa, & Paternoster, 2016, p. 95), inner awareness turns out to be a key feature of persons, either in the sense that it is a defining feature of them or in the sense that it grounds the higher form of self-consciousness which is essential to them. Furthermore, it has been argued that the basic sense of existence accompanying our ordinary experiences is a necessary precondition for the construction of our personal identity—understood here as the kind of identity that serves us to define *who* we are (cf. Gallagher, 2000, 2013; Zahavi, 2005). Overall, thus, exploring the nature of inner awareness promises to shed important light on the nature of persons and their identities.

2. The State Self-awareness View

The state self-awareness view (SSV) asserts that inner awareness—the subject's constant awareness of their own conscious states—is constituted by these states being aware of themselves. More formally, proponents of SSV endorse the following core thesis (CT):

4 More on the features of such an awareness below.

5 Arguably, by being aware of our occurrent experiences, we do not simply exist *qua* experiencing subjects, but we also have a certain feeling of such an existence.

6 Proponents of the state self-awareness view are, among others, Giustina (2024), Kriegel (2009b), McClelland (2013), Williford (2015), and Zahavi (2005, 2020).

7 See Smith (2017, sec. 4.1) for a review of philosophers who consider self-consciousness essential to personhood.

(CT) For any subject S, conscious state M of S, and time t, S is inner aware of M at t in virtue of M's being aware of itself at t.

Various interpretations of CT exist, leading to different versions of SSV. Specifically, subscribers to CT diverge in (i) their explication of inner awareness (their explanandum) and (ii) their qualifications of the suitable state self-awareness (their explanans). This section delves into these differences to set the stage for the discussion to follow. Since the disagreement on (ii) stems from differing views on (i), I will do this by considering which claims about inner awareness SSV theorists share and which they do not. Hopefully, this will also help clarify the overall theoretical framework of SSV.

However, a caveat is needed before proceeding. Some might find SSV suspicious or outright false, for it suggests mental states are *aware* of themselves and, thus, *subjects of awareness*. To avoid misconstrual, it is worth noticing that most SSV proponents do not claim that mental states are aware like creatures are.[8] "Awareness" in this context tends to be used metaphorically, indicating a special reflexive relationship entertained by conscious mental states. With this clarification in mind, we can examine the main claims about inner awareness shared by all subscribers to CT.

The first claim I consider fixes the place of inner awareness within consciousness. As noticed, advocates of inner awareness take it to be present in all conscious experiences, maintaining that one is necessarily aware of it whenever one is in a conscious state. Proponents of SSV craft such a ubiquity claim rather strongly, maintaining that inner awareness is not only *necessary* for consciousness but also *constitutive* of it. Thus, they endorse the claim that [1] inner awareness is what makes a mental state conscious.

What underlies [1] is the view that conscious mental states essentially feature so-called *for-me-ness*, the conscious states' property of being "for their subject" (of being phenomenally given to their subject).[9] This property, in fact, is typically spelled out in terms of inner awareness (cf. Janzen, 2008, p. 156; Kriegel, 2009b, pp. 47-48). Moreover, it is taken to constitute consciousness *as such*—what makes a mental state conscious. On this view, thus, inner awareness is the *source* of consciousness, what makes a conscious state for me and, thereby, conscious in the first place.

[1] is a claim SSV shares with other accounts of inner awareness, most notably higher-order monitoring accounts (see, among others, Coleman, 2015; Gennaro, 2012; Lycan, 2001; Rosenthal, 1997), from which SSV derives. These accounts also ground inner awareness in an awareness relation borne by mental states. However, while SSV views this as a relation conscious states bear to themselves, higher-order monitoring accounts see it as a relation between two distinct mental states, where one state is directed at another.

SSV theorists depart from higher-order monitoring accounts based on three additional claims they share about inner awareness. First, [2] inner awareness is phenomenal, meaning we are experientially presented with our conscious states; we are conscious of them. Second, [3] inner awareness is non-reflective. While reflective awareness is introspective, objectifying (viz., presenting the object of awareness as standing in opposition to the subject), conceptual, and possibly inferential, inner awareness is not. Third, [4] inner awareness puts the subject in an intimate relationship with their conscious states, meaning our awareness of our conscious

8 I say "most proponents" because some versions of the view—specifically some variants of the non-representational account—arguably imply that mental states are literally aware of themselves.

9 See Zahavi & Kriegel (2015) for a detailed discussion of for-me-ness as an essential component of the phenomenal character of conscious mental states.

states cannot be illusory or hallucinatory, unlike our perception of external objects. SSV theorists argue that higher-order monitoring accounts struggle to accommodate these claims, while SSV easily integrates them, making it a more plausible account (Janzen, 2008; Kriegel, 2009b; Zahavi, 2004).

Other claims about inner awareness are more controversial than those just mentioned among SSV theorists. Two claims, in particular, cause the main divisions within the SSV family tree. The first is that [5] inner awareness involves the subject *representing* its conscious state. Subscribers to [5] maintain that the "of" of inner awareness is the "of" of intentionality. Accordingly, they unpack the state self-awareness suitable to ground inner awareness in representational terms, advocating for *self-representationalism*:

(SR) for any conscious state M of a subject S, S is inner aware of M (and hence M is for me) in virtue of M's suitably representing itself.

Self-representationalism comes in different varieties, depending on how the state self-representation is qualified. One influential variety qualifies it as specific, essential, and non-derivative (Kriegel, 2009b). However, these details are not crucial for what follows. What matters is that, according to the self-representationalist branch of SSV, a conscious state always suitably represents itself, making it a state of which the subject is inner aware.

Some SSV theorists deny [5] instead on the basis that the intimacy of inner awareness speaks against it. Accordingly, they construe the relevant state self-awareness in non-representational terms, typically in terms of the acquaintance relation, defending thus *self-non-representationalism*:

(SNR) for any conscious state M of a subject S, S is inner aware of M (and hence M is for me) in virtue of M's bearing a suitable non-representational relation to itself.

The exact nature of this putative non-representational relation is debated. For instance, Zahavi (2005, 2014, 2020) and Williford (2015, 2019) explicate it in terms of a primitive acquaintance relation conscious states bear to themselves. Giustina (2024), instead, appeals to self-quotation, understood as the mental state's relation of quoting or displaying itself.

The second main controversial claim among SSV theorists is that [6] inner awareness involves the awareness of the subject themself in addition to their conscious states. [6] concerns the object of inner awareness. Its subscribers diverge in how they take the subject to figure in inner awareness. In a modest view, the subject appears merely alongside the experience. In a more demanding view, the subject appears as the owner of the experience.[10] Regardless of these differences, [6] marks out the distinction within the SSV family between what—following Sebastián (2012)—we might call subject-involving (SI) and mental state-involving (MSI) accounts of inner awareness:

(SI) for any conscious state M of a subject S, S is inner aware of M (and hence M is for me) in virtue of M's being somehow aware of S and itself.

(MSI) for any conscious state M of a subject S, S is inner aware of M (and hence M is for me) in virtue of M's being just aware of itself.

10 For more on these views, see Guillot (2017)

Such a distinction is orthogonal to the one between self-representationalism and non-self-representationalism. These views, thus, admit both subject-involving and mental state-involving versions. For instance, Kriegel (2009b) defends a mental state-involving version of self-representationalism, while Sebastián (2012) proposes a subject-involving variant. With a clearer understanding of the SSV family tree, we can now turn our attention to what, I believe, makes it a fruitless tree.

3. The Problem of *State* Awareness

SSV has been questioned on several grounds. Some critiques have focused on specific versions of the view, while others have taken a broader approach, questioning the core of SSV. The latter chiefly revolves around either SSV's account of the explanandum (cf. Dainton, 2016; Howell & Thompson, 2017) or the explanatory adequacy of the state self-awareness, specifically whether a reflexive awareness of mental states can account for them being objects of inner awareness (cf. Gennaro, 2012, ch. 5).

One aspect, however, has not been the subject of much criticism: that inner awareness ultimately depends on an awareness relationship entertained by mental states. Put another way, what is not seen as particularly problematic within the SSV theoretical framework is that my inner awareness of my occurrent experience is ultimately grounded in a state awareness, whether or not it takes the form of self-awareness.[11] I find this attitude misleading. In my view, the deepest issue of SSV lies precisely in this "state-first" approach to the explanation of inner awareness—in its attempt to account for inner awareness through an awareness relationship held by mental states.

My concern develops upon a criticism Joseph Levine (2006) raised against the self-representationalist branch of SSV, specifically against its mental state-involving variant. This view, I recall, accounts for inner awareness in terms of a mental state's suitable representation of itself. Since inner awareness constitutes the for-me-ness of conscious states—what makes a mental state conscious—this is tantamount to claiming that mental states are for their subject—and hence conscious—in virtue of being suitably self-representing states.[12]

According to Levine, it is unclear how self-representing states could recover the for-me-ness of our conscious states. As long as self-representing states represent themselves in the same way they represent other things, he claims, one can reasonably ask what makes such states for me: states of which I am aware. As he puts it,

> Somehow, what we have in conscious states are representations that are intrinsically of subjective significance, "animated" as it were, and I maintain that we really don't understand how that is possible. It doesn't seem to be a matter of more of the same—more representation of the same kind—but rather representation of a different kind altogether (Levine, 2006, p. 195).

Such a criticism is sometimes considered one of the most compelling objections to self-representationalism. Kriegel (2011)—a prominent defender of such an account—considers it "the deepest objection to self-representationalism" (p. 69). On this ground, some scholars have appealed to it to support self-non-representationalism.[13] However, on scrutiny, Levine's

11 To be sure, I am not saying that nobody has ever questioned this aspect. In fact, I will point out in a moment a criticism Levine raised against self-representationalism that goes in this direction, which, for this reason, I will elaborate on. As we shall see, however, this criticism is not typically intended to undermine the whole SSV family.
12 The most well-developed model of this view is due to Kriegel (2005; 2009a; 2009b; 2011).
13 See, for instance, Giustina (2022).

criticism is much broader in scope, running over the whole SSV family tree.[14] Or, at least, adapting it to this purpose is relatively easy. To appreciate this, it is crucial to pinpoint the heart of the objection.

The bulk of Levine's objection is that suitable self-representations cannot account for mental states' being for us because they merely add more representations of the kind involved in representing other things. But why are the latter representations unsuited to recover inner awareness/for-me-ness? I contend that the issue lies not in what mental states represent or how they represent but in the fact that *they* represent—that mental states are the ultimate subject of the representation relation. In other words, the difficulty in understanding why a state representing itself suffices to make it "not merely something happening within her, but 'for her'" (Levine, 2006, p. 195) stems from its being a *state representation*, just like other familiar kinds of representations.

Indeed, understanding how a particular state self-representation can explain the subject's inner awareness of their mental state is puzzling. The explanandum refers to a relation between the subject and their mental state, while the explanans refers to a relation between the mental state and itself. Given that, one might reasonably ask why and how the latter can recover the former. Even if a specific qualification of the right sort of self-representation were extensionally adequate, we would still face an explanatory gap between for-me-ness and this relevant self-representation.

Significantly, in considering Levine's complaint, Kriegel (2011) provides a similar analysis of its core issue. "What Levine's line of objection seems to press," he claims, "is the need for a sui generis notion of representation-for-me, *a kind of primitive intentional relation borne by subjects*, rather than by subjects' internal states" (*Ibid.*, p. 19, my emphasis).

However, if this is the case, it is evident that such a problem outstrips the boundaries of self-representationalism, for it does not really concern the representational treatment such an account gives to the state self-awareness suitable to ground inner awareness. Rather, it concerns the more general claim that we can account for inner awareness by appealing to a mental state's relationship. As such, the question Levine raises to self-representationalism can be raised—with equal force—to other variants of SSV. Consider, for instance, self-non-representationalism in its mental state-involving variant, which holds that inner awareness is ultimately grounded in a non-representational awareness that a subject's state has of itself. Just as with self-representing states, we can legitimately ask why a mental state of us being non-representationally aware of itself makes it a state of which we are inner aware: not just 'in us' but 'given to us.'

Qualifying the right kind of state non-representational awareness does not help much in addressing such a question. Whether we construe it as the mental state's relation of quoting (or displaying) itself (Giustina, 2024) or as the mental state's relationship of being acquainted with itself (Zahavi, 2014; 2020; Williford, 2015; 2019), we still have no grip on why this should have anything to do with my inner awareness of the state. There is daylight between it and the relationship it is supposed to explain. Inner awareness intimately relates me to my conscious state, while the putative non-representational relationship invoked to explain it, at best, intimately relates my mental state to itself.

Including myself among the objects of the relevant non-representational awareness also does not help. That is, even if we endorse a subject-involving variant of self-non-

14 The instrumental use that some proponents of the non-representational variant of SSV make of Levine's critique demonstrates how unproblematic it is deemed to ground inner awareness in state awareness.

representationalism, the relevant awareness relation remains at the wrong level, so to speak; it is not a relation borne by me but by an internal state of mine.[15]

Overall, a deep explanatory gap lies at the roots of the SSV family tree. An account of inner awareness seeks to explain what makes us aware of our conscious states, what makes the latter not just 'in us' but 'for us' (conscious in the first place). We are seeking what grounds a subject-level phenomenon. However, it is hard to see how state self-awareness could fulfill this role, as it is a mental state-level phenomenon. All this kind of awareness might reasonably recover is that a mental state is given to itself, namely, that it instantiates the property of for-*itself*-ness. This is the wrong kind of property instantiation: the property of conscious states we seek is for-*me*-ness. Accordingly, no matter how one specifies it, for any state self-awareness taken to ground inner awareness, the following gap-revealing question stands out: why and how do we get inner awareness out of it? Why and how does for-me-ness obtain in virtue of such a for-itself-ness? I call this the problem of state awareness for SSV.

4. A (unsuccessful) way out

I believe the problem of state awareness is the deepest issue of SSV, for it questions the very intelligibility of the view. Without an explanation of why and how the grounding relation between state self-awareness (the grounding fact) and inner awareness (the grounded fact) holds, we cannot fully grasp what it means for the latter to obtain in virtue of the former.

It might be objected, however, that I failed to consider a thesis endorsed by many SSV theorists that effectively backs SSV with an explanation of the relevant grounding relationship, thereby dissolving the problem at hand. This is to contend, in other words, that the explanatory gap, on which my issue rests, exists, but it is harmless, as it is just *apparent*. The thesis I have in mind is what we might call the *priority of state consciousness* (PSC) thesis.[16] Let us examine it more closely.

Since Rosenthal (1986) it is customary to distinguish between consciousness as a property of subjects, expressed by sentences like "I am conscious" or "I am conscious of the tree in front of me," and consciousness as a property of mental states, expressed by sentences like "Marco's desire is conscious." The former is called creature consciousness, and the latter is called state consciousness. These properties are further specified by drawing the parallel distinction between *transitive* and *intransitive consciousness*. The former is a relational property expressed by the transitive locution 'x is conscious of y.' The latter is an intrinsic property expressed by the intransitive locution 'x is conscious.' Accordingly, four types of consciousness are typically distinguished conceptually: *intransitive creature consciousness, transitive creature consciousness, intransitive state consciousness*, and *transitive state consciousness*. The latter may sound odd to some readers, but like state awareness, the use of "conscious of" here is idiosyncratic. Transitive state consciousness is a *term of art*, referring to the property mental states have when, and only when, their subjects are transitively conscious of something in virtue of being in them (cf. Kriegel, 2009, p. 28).

A natural question is what relationship, if any, exists among these four properties. PSC addresses such a question. It holds that intransitive state consciousness, the mental state's property of *being conscious*, is explanatorily prior to the other three properties, in the sense that the latter all ultimately depend on the former.

PSC is widely endorsed in the literature on consciousness, though few philosophers

15 The same reasoning applies to the subject-involving variant of self-representationalism.

16 The thesis identifying subjects of experience with their experiences might be equally relevant. Space constraints, however, forced me to make a choice on which thesis to consider. I decided to discuss PSC because the other is somehow marginal in the literature (possibly endorsed just by Zahavi and Williford) and highly revisionary (Barbieri 2025; Bayne, 2008).

express it explicitly, and even fewer argue for it.[17] To my knowledge, Kriegel (2003, 2009b) is the only one who makes a case for it among SSV theorists. He argues that both kinds of creature consciousness depend on their state consciousness counterparts. Thus, a subject is intransitively conscious in virtue of being in an intransitively conscious state and transitively conscious in virtue of being in a transitively conscious state. Moreover, he argues that transitive state consciousness depends on intransitive state consciousness. According to him, in fact, a mental state cannot be transitively conscious—making its subject transitively conscious of something—without being intransitively conscious in the first place (*Ibid.,* pp. 30-31).

PSC seems to solve the problem of *state* awareness straightforwardly. The subject's inner awareness of their conscious state is a conscious phenomenon and, to that extent, a form of transitive creature consciousness. Since the latter depends on transitive state consciousness, it is natural to view state self-awareness as a kind of transitive state consciousness: the property a mental state has of making its subject conscious of itself. Thus, PSC backs SSV with an explanation of why and how the putative grounding relation holds: inner awareness is obtained in virtue of state self-awareness *because* (transitive) state consciousness is prior to (transitive) creature consciousness.

Unfortunately, this straightforward explanation for backing SSV does not work, for PSC is in tension, if not plainly inconsistent, with [1], the claim that inner awareness is constitutive of consciousness.[18] According to SSV, recall, the subject's inner awareness of their occurrent mental state *makes* the latter conscious *simpliciter*, that is, intransitively conscious. This means that (a form of) transitive creature consciousness is metaphysically prior to intransitive state consciousness: a mental state is intransitively conscious *in virtue of* its subject being conscious of it. However, since PSC claims that transitive state consciousness ultimately depends on intransitive state consciousness, it follows that the suitable awareness my occurrent conscious state has of itself would be both what *ultimately grounds* my inner awareness and what *is ultimately grounded* in my inner awareness. Thus, not only does PSC lack the resources to make the grounding relationship advocated by SSV intelligible, but it also adds a problematic explanatory circularity to it. Overall, appealing to PSC to way out from the problem of *state* awareness is a dead end.

5. Conclusion

In contemporary philosophy of mind, the sense of personal existence that many classical philosophers have believed to permeate our experience is often cashed out in terms of the ubiquity of one's inner awareness of one's own experience. In this paper, I addressed what explains this inner awareness, arguing against the view that it is ultimately grounded in a fundamental awareness that my occurrent experience has of itself. This is the state self-awareness view (SSV).

I began by detailing the core of SSV and its main variants. I then showed that all versions of SSV suffer from the problem of *state* awareness, which is the problem of understanding why and how a mental state-level relation like state self-awareness could recover a subject-level relation like inner awareness. Finally, I defended the severity of this problem for SSV by blocking a potential reply.

Naturally, my take on the explanatory issue of inner awareness has been more negative than positive: I argued for what does not ground inner awareness rather than what grounds

17 Philosophers who formulate PSC explicitly include, among others, Block (1995), Dretske (1993), Gennaro (2012), Kriegel (2009b), and McClelland (2012).

18 I discussed more extensively the inconsistency at hand in (Barbieri, 2024).

it. However, eliminating some accounts from the range of possibilities is already a significant achievement, especially when these accounts foreground the discussion. Furthermore, I believe that the problem of *state* awareness points strongly to the fact that a promising account of inner awareness cannot dispense with treating it fundamentally as it appears: a relation entertained by the subject rather than their mental states. However, defending such a claim in detail and elaborating on the nature of such a subject's relationship is an additional task, a task for another work.

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