

# ScholarWorks@GSU

## Self-Consciousness, Self-Ascription, and the Mental Self

Authors	Cheng, Chieh-ling
Citation	Cheng, Chieh-ling. "Self-Consciousness, Self-Ascription, and the Mental Self." 2016. Thesis, Georgia State University. <a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/8621137">https://doi.org/10.57709/8621137</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/8621137">https://doi.org/10.57709/8621137</a>
Download date	2026-03-08 21:38:48
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/11987">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/11987</a>

# SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, SELF-AScription, AND THE MENTAL SELF

by

KATHERINE CHENG

Under the Direction of Dan Weiskopf, Ph.D.

## ABSTRACT

Galen Strawson argues that we have a sense of mental selves, which are entities that have mental features but do not have bodily features. In particular, he argues that there is a form of self-consciousness that involves a conception of the mental self. His mental self view is opposed to the embodied self view, the view that the self must be conceived of as an entity that has both mental and bodily features. In this paper, I will argue against Strawson's mental self view and for the embodied self view. I will draw on P. F. Strawson's theory of persons and Gareth Evans' Generality Constraint to argue that Galen Strawson fails to provide a satisfactory account of the mental self that can counter the embodied self view.

INDEX WORDS: Self-consciousness, Self-ascription, Self and others, Mental self, Embodiment, Generality Constraint

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, SELF-ASCRPTION, AND THE MENTAL SELF

by

KATHERINE CHENG

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

Copyright by  
Chieh-Ling Cheng  
2016

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, SELF-AScription, AND THE MENTAL SELF

by

KATHERINE CHENG

Committee Chair: Dan Weiskopf

Committee: Eddy Nahmias

Neil Van Leeuwen

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2016

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dan Weiskopf, for his guidance, support, and encouragement throughout the process of thesis writing and PhD application. I'm grateful for his pressing questions and insightful comments, which always pushed me further. I would also like to thank Eddy Nahmias, whose extensive comments and feedback helped me with the structure of this thesis and the clarity of my writing. I also appreciate Neil Van Leeuwen's interesting questions. Alongside my committee members, I'd also like to thank Sandy Dwyer, who is always willing to help and whose advice has always been wise.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SELF AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.1 The Experience of the Self and the Conception of the Self .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.2 Self-Consciousness and the Conception of the Mental Self.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.3 Self-Ascription and the Conception of Other Subjects.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3 A CONSTITUTIVE LINK BETWEEN SELF-ASCRPTION AND OTHER- ASCRPTION .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3.1 Other-Ascription .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>3.2 Self-Ascription, Priority, and Thought-Elements .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3.3 Self-Ascription, Thought-Elements, and Full-Fledged Concepts .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.4 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>25</b>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

We are conscious of ourselves as selves, conscious subjects that have experiences, entertain thoughts, carry out actions, etc. But it is a matter of contention whether we are conscious of selves as mental selves, entities that have mental properties but do not have bodily properties, or as embodied selves, entities that have both mental and bodily properties.

Galen Strawson (2009) argues that we are conscious of ourselves as *mental selves*. In particular, he argues that there is a form of self-consciousness that involves a conception of the mental self. Strawson's argument hinges on the claim that there is a form of self-consciousness that involves a conception of the self and a conception of oneself "solely in one's mental aspects" (111). I will call this form of self-consciousness a minimal form of self-consciousness (MSC). Since MSC involves a conception of oneself "solely in one's mental aspects," MSC does not involve a conception of oneself as having a body. Therefore, MSC exclusively involves a conception of the mental self and does not involve a conception of the embodied self.

Strawson's mental self view is opposed to the embodied self view. According to the embodied self view, self-consciousness must involve a conception of the embodied self. One must be conscious of one's experiencing or thinking self as "a spatially extended object" (Brewer 1995) or as "shaped, located, and solid" (Cassam 1999). On this view, Strawson's MSC, which is also a form of self-consciousness, should then also involve a conception of the self as having such spatial features. Strawson, by contrast, attempts to show that consciousness of ourselves as spatially extended is not essential to consciousness of the self.

In this paper, I will argue against Strawson's mental self view and for the embodied self view. In particular, I will argue that Strawson is not justified in holding that MSC involves a conception of oneself "solely in one's mental aspects." If Strawson is not justified in holding that

MSC involves a conception of oneself solely in one's mental aspects, he will then fail to establish his account of the mental self.

In section 2, I will explain Strawson's view of our ordinary conception of the self. I will then explain how, on Strawson's account, self-consciousness involves a conception of the self, and in particular, a conception of the mental self. After laying out Strawson's view, I will then present my objection. I will argue that Strawson ignores a crucial component of MSC, which is self-ascription, the ability to ascribe mental features to oneself. This ability, as P. F. Strawson (1959) points out, is constitutively linked to other-ascription, the ability to ascribe mental features to others. On P. F. Strawson's view, since self-ascription is constitutively linked to other-ascription, self-consciousness must involve a conception of oneself as bodily, for a self-conscious being needs some relevant conception of bodily features to ascribe mental features to others. Strawson's<sup>1</sup> MSC, which is a form of self-consciousness, then must involve a conception of oneself as bodily.

In section 3, I will draw on Gareth Evans' Generality Constraint to further elaborate on this constitutive link between self-ascription and other-ascription, and thereby hold that MSC involves a conception of the embodied self rather than the mental self. I will then consider Strawson's possible responses and argue that those responses either do not work or would end up undermining his mental self view. I will thus conclude that Strawson fails to provide a satisfactory account of the mental self that can counter the embodied self view.

---

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, 'Strawson' refers to Galen Strawson unless noted otherwise, while I will include "P. F." for the elder Strawson.

## **2 THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SELF AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS**

Strawson (2009) holds that most human beings have the experience of the self, which is the experience of oneself as an “‘inner’ locus of consciousness” and “a mental presence, a mental someone, a mental something that is a conscious subject” (36). He claims that such experience is especially vivid when one is aware of “the fact that one’s thoughts are unobservable by others and of the fundamental respect in which one is ‘alone in one’s head’” (8, 36).

On Strawson’s view, the experience of the self is a “cognitive experience,” which is an experience that is informed by the conception of the self (38). In order to know about our conception of the self, Strawson claims, we need to examine our experience of the self and pin down the essential elements that structure such experience. With these essential elements, which I will explain more about later, Strawson then turns to argue that there is a form of self-consciousness, a minimal form of consciousness (MSC) as I will call it, that involves these essential elements. Given that these essential elements are indicators of an experience or a conception of the self, Strawson holds that MSC involves an experience or a conception of the self.

After establishing the claim that MSC involves a conception of the self, Strawson then points out that MSC is a form of self-consciousness that involves consciousness of oneself “solely in one’s mental aspects” (111), and thus MSC involves a conception of the mental self. However, I will argue that MSC in fact involves a conception of oneself as bodily, and thus MSC involves a conception of the embodied self.

### **2.1 The Experience of the Self and the Conception of the Self**

Strawson holds that the experience of the self has some structure, and he attempts to identify the structuring elements that are essential to such experience. From the understanding of those

elements essential to our *experience* of the self, he holds that we can know about our *conception* of the self. Although Strawson does not specify how the experience of the self and the conception of the self are related, he maintains that these two have a close relation. In what follows, I will explain what those essential elements are and what they tell us about our conception of the self.

The first two elements are *subject of experience* and *the mental*, which are stated in Strawson's definition of the experience of the self. The experience of the self, as Strawson defines it, is the experience of oneself as "a mental something that is a conscious subject" (36). For Strawson, such an experience is "the experience that people have of themselves as being an 'inner' locus of consciousness, something that is essentially not the same thing as a human being considered as a whole" (36). He also claims:

The sense of oneself as an inner conscious presence, the early realization of the fact that one's thoughts are unobservable by others, the experience of the profound sense in which one is alone in one's head or mind, the experience of oneself as experiencing, as having a 'palpitating inward life'—these aspects of [self]-experience are among the deepest facts about human existence. (36)

Strawson thus holds that the experience of the self essentially involves the element of subject of experience and the mental. It follows that our conception of the self essentially involves a conception of a subject of experience and a conception of the mental.

The third element is *a thing or object*. According to Strawson, our ordinary experience of the self involves the experience of ourselves as a thing that has feelings, entertains thoughts, carries out actions, etc. Such experience, Strawson claims, implies that we ordinarily conceive of

the self as something that “has properties” but “is not itself just a property of something else” (65). Such conception, Strawson claims, implies a conception of the self as a thing or object.

The fourth element is *singleness or singularity*. On Strawson’s view, the experience of the self as a thing or object implies the experience of the self as something that is single. This singleness, Strawson claims, is not the kind of singleness that a single bundle of things has. Rather, he holds that the self is experienced as single “in the way in which a single marble is figured as single when compared with a single group of marbles” (72). His point is that when we experience ourselves as a thing or object, we also experience ourselves as having certain causal features, as something that “can affect things and can be affected” (66). The causal profile of the self, he claims, is similar to the causal profile of a single marble rather than of a group of marbles, in the sense that a single marble has some kind of “unity of internal causal connectedness” that is stronger than the unity of a group of marbles (72). However, Strawson does not specify what this unity of internal causal connectedness is and in what sense the self has the kind of unity that makes it more like a single thing rather than a group or bundle of things. Nevertheless, Strawson holds that the self is experienced as a single thing rather than a bundle of things, and he then claims that the self is conceived of as a single thing. With the above four essential elements: subject of experience, the mental, a thing or object, and singleness, Strawson concludes that our conception of the self is essentially *a subject of experience-as-single-mental-thing* (172).

Here, some may argue that Strawson does not fully capture our conception of the self with these four elements, for our experience of the self usually involves something more than just being a subject of experience that is a single mental thing. For example, we also experience ourselves as *being an agent* or *having diachronic existence*. Strawson, by contrast, claims that

the element of agency and the element of diachronic existence are not essential to the experience of the self. His reason is that we experience ourselves as conscious subjects, even when we do not experience ourselves as agents or as persisting. We may sometimes be conscious of ourselves solely as passive beings with experiences flowing through us, or we may sometimes have no thoughts of our long-term existence. However, Strawson claims, it seems that at those moments, we still have a vivid experience of the self.

Others, especially proponents of the embodied self view, may argue that when we experience ourselves as conscious subjects, we also experience ourselves as *having a body*. Given the constant existence of our background bodily awareness such as proprioception, there seems to be no reason to believe that when we experience ourselves as conscious subjects, we do not also experience ourselves as having a body. Strawson, however, argues that “the constantly impinging phenomena of one’s mental life are in any case more salient in the constitution of one’s sense that there is such a thing as the self than are the phenomena of bodily experience, and it is this sense of self that is of primary concern” (29).

Strawson’s claim is built on an examination of the experience of the self. However, it is arguable that some people always experience themselves as having a body, and that they cannot experience themselves as selves unless they also experience themselves as having a body. These people may object to Strawson and argue that Strawson misdescribes the experience of the self since the experience of having a body is no less salient than “the constantly impinging phenomena of one’s mental life” are in constituting one’s sense of self. To further substantiate his mental self view, Strawson needs to provide further evidence for his description of the experience such that it involves a conception of something that can be called as the self and is a

purely mental thing. Strawson, then, turns to the discussion of self-consciousness and from which he attempts to provide further support for his mental self view.

## **2.2 Self-Consciousness and the Conception of the Mental Self**

Strawson argues that there is a form of self-consciousness that involves a conception of the self and does not involve a conception of the body. He thus argues that this form of self-consciousness involves a conception of the mental self. His view, however, does not rule out the possibility that there are other forms of self-consciousness that involve a conception of the embodied self. What Strawson attempts to show here is that there is at least one form of self-consciousness that exclusively involves a conception of the mental self (i.e., it does not involve any conception of oneself as embodied).

According to Strawson, one entertains this form of self-consciousness when one thinks, for example, “I’m thinking” or “I’m feeling pain.” When one thinks so, Strawson claims, one thinks of oneself “solely in one’s mental aspects” (2009, 111), since thinking and feeling pain are both one’s mental states.<sup>2</sup> I will call this form of self-consciousness a minimal form of self-consciousness (MSC). I call it a minimal form since, as I will explain it in the later section, Strawson argues that this form of self-consciousness involves few conceptual preconditions. On Strawson’s view, since this minimal form of self-consciousness, MSC, is consciousness of oneself “solely in one’s mental aspects,” it follows that MSC does not involve a conception of oneself as having a body.

Strawson then argues that MSC involves a conception of the self, by arguing that MSC involves a conception of oneself that satisfies the four essential elements of the conception of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Some may argue that one must have a body in order to have a feeling of pain. Strawson’s claim here, however, is that although having a feeling of pain may depend on having a body, this dependence is not constitutive.

self. He begins his argument by claiming that when one entertains MSC and thinks “I’m thinking,” one necessarily thinks of oneself as “the thinker or haver of the thought” with this use of ‘I’ (114).<sup>3</sup> He then argues that, first of all, the thinker is essentially something that bears thoughts or experiences. Thus, when one thinks of oneself as the thinker, one must think of oneself as *a subject of experience*. Second, the thinker is essentially something that has properties, such as the properties of having experiences and entertaining thoughts. Thus, when one thinks of oneself as the thinker, one must think of oneself as *a thing*. Third, since the properties of the thinker are mental properties, one must think of oneself as something that is *mental*. Finally, since one thinks of oneself as *the* thinker, one must think of oneself as something that is *single* rather than multiple (114).

Strawson thus concludes that when one entertains MSC and thinks “I’m thinking,” one conceives of oneself as a subject of experience-as-single-mental-thing, and thus conceives of oneself as a self. Since MSC does not involve a conception of oneself as having a body, Strawson claims, MSC involves a conception of the self that is the mental self.

More precisely, Strawson’s view is that MSC’s involving a conception of the self does not depend its involving a conception of the body. In other words, the conception of oneself *qua* mental is sufficient for the conception of oneself *qua* subject of experience-as-single-thing. However, proponents of the embodied self view hold that this sufficient relation cannot stand. The reason is that one’s conception of oneself as a single thing must be grounded in one’s

---

<sup>3</sup> Here, theorists such as Gilbert Ryle may object that one can never think of oneself as the thinker. His reason is that this way of thinking of oneself requires a higher-order act; but such a higher-order act cannot be acted upon by the one who performs the act (Ryle 1949, 175). To avoid this line of objection, Strawson appeals to an *unreflective* form of self-consciousness and argues that a self-conscious being can unreflectively think of oneself as the thinker. This unreflective form of self-consciousness, he claims does not require performing some higher-order acts as Ryle describes (see Strawson 2009, 176-181).

conception of oneself as having a single body (e.g., see Bermúdez *et al.* 1995; Campbell 1995; Cassam 1997). Without a conception of the body, it is not possible for the essential elements of the conception of the self to be satisfied. Thus, proponents of the embodied self view hold that MSC, which involves a conception of the self, must involve a conception of oneself as having a body.

However, even if it is true that the essential elements of the conception of the self can be satisfied just by experiencing oneself in certain ways, MSC may still require a conception of oneself as having a body. The reason is that MSC does not just involve a conception of the self. Instead, MSC involves something more, and this something is self-ascription, the ability to ascribe features to oneself. Self-ascription, as I will argue, involve a conception of oneself as bodily.

Thus, granted that the essential elements of the conception of the self can be satisfied just by experiencing oneself in certain ways, I will argue that MSC still involves a conception of oneself as bodily. I will draw on P. F. Strawson's theory of persons to illustrate this point.

### **2.3 Self-Ascription and the Conception of Other Subjects**

Self-consciousness involves self-ascription. MSC, which is a form of self-consciousness, also involves self-ascription. When one thinks "I'm feeling pain," one ascribes an experience of pain to oneself. However, as P. F. Strawson (1959) points out, one who is able to ascribe mental features to oneself must also be able to ascribe those mental features to others. Because of other-ascription, he claims, one's conception of those mental features must involve a conception of bodily features. It then follows that MSC involves a conception of oneself as bodily. I will explain P. F. Strawson's view in what follows.

According to P. F. Strawson, there is a necessary condition for one's ascribing mental features to oneself such that "one should also ascribe them, or be prepared to ascribe them, to others who are not oneself" (99). He holds that this is a purely logical point: "the idea of a predicate is correlative with that of a *range* of distinguishable individuals of which the predicate can be significantly, though not necessarily truly, affirmed" (99, n. 1).

P. F. Strawson then points out that the way one ascribes mental features to others is based on observing their behaviors. Thus, in order to ascribe mental features to others, one must have some sense of what it is like for others to have those mental features in terms of their behaviors. It follows that one's conception of the mental features must include relevant bodily features. P. F. Strawson thus famously holds "the primitiveness of the concept of a person." On this view, one's conception of oneself in self-consciousness is a person, a type of entity to which both mental features and bodily features are equally ascribable (102).

Strawson takes P. F. Strawson's view as a threat to his mental self view. If P. F. Strawson's view is right, then it seems that MSC, which involves self-ascribing mental features, must *constitutively* involve a conception of oneself as having bodily features. It then seems to follow that Strawson is not justified in claiming that MSC involves thinking of oneself solely in one's mental aspects.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Here, some may point out that, it seems, P. F. Strawson's view only implies that the ability to ascribe mental features requires the ability to track relevant bodily behaviors. However, it does not follow from such view that when one thinks "I'm feeling pain," one cannot conceptually separate the mental and the bodily states and think of one's feeling of pain as a purely mental state. It then seems Strawson can in fact argue that even if P. F. Strawson's view is correct, MSC can still involve thinking of oneself solely in one's mental aspects. Thus, Strawson's mental self view still holds. However, I think this position demands a clear definition of what it is to have a conception of the mental and how having a conception of the mental is different from having a conception of the body, and, as I will argue in Section 3.3, such a definition is exactly where Strawson's view falls short.

Strawson thus attempts to reject P. F. Strawson's view. He does so by pointing out that the key move in P. F. Strawson's view is that "the notions of self and other are essentially correlative" (124). He then takes P. F. Strawson's view to be committed to a thesis that he calls the Conception of Others Thesis, and he aims to argue that this thesis is wrong. By doing so, he claims that P. F. Strawson cannot establish the embodied self view by arguing for an essential relation between the notion of the self and the other (124).

Here is the Conception of Others Thesis:

*The Conception of Others Thesis (COT):* If one is self-conscious, one must possess some conception of other subjects of experience (Strawson 2009, 121).

COT applies to all forms of self-consciousness. However, the focus here is on MSC, which is only one of those forms. I will thus limit the discussion of COT solely on MSC, the form of self-consciousness that is characterized as consciousness of oneself solely in one's mental aspects:

*COT'*: If one entertains MSC, one must possess some conception of other subjects of experience.

P. F. Strawson's view, understood in terms of COT', is that since MSC necessarily involves self-ascription, and since self-ascription is necessarily linked to other-ascription, it follows that MSC necessarily involves a conception of other subjects of experience. And it is because MSC necessarily involves a conception of other subjects of experience that MSC involves a conception of oneself as bodily.

Strawson, thus, argues that COT' is wrong. However, he does not provide a direct response to P. F. Strawson's claim that self-ascription is necessarily linked to other-ascription. Instead, he opts to argue that one who entertains MSC can conceive of oneself as a subject of experience without having a conception of other subjects (121-123). His reasoning is

summarized as follows: MSC involves a conception of the self, and thus involves a conception of oneself as a subject of experience. If having a conception of oneself as a subject of experience does not depend on having a conception of other subjects of experience, then MSC does not require a conception of other subjects of experience. It then follows that COT' is wrong.

Strawson's strategy, again, is to argue that one who entertains MSC can conceive of oneself as a subject of experience just by *experiencing* oneself in certain way, which is experiencing oneself as a subject of experience. He holds that such way of experiencing oneself does not require further justification, and thus does not depend on having a conception of other subjects of experience. It follows that MSC does not require a conception of other subjects.

However, I think that Strawson's argument shifts the topic from the link between self-ascription and other-ascription to the relation between conceiving of oneself as subject and conceiving of other subjects. Moreover, his argument assumes that there is no other component of self-consciousness that may require a conception of other subjects of experience. However, in addition to conceiving of oneself as a subject, there is a component of self-consciousness that may involve a conception of other subjects. This component is self-ascription. And it seems that there is a fundamental sense of the conception of oneself as a subject of experience, such that it is because one self-ascribe mental features that one conceives of oneself as a subject of experience. In the next section, I will draw on Evans' Generality Constraint to elaborate on the link between self-ascription and other-ascription, and thereby argue for COT'.

### 3      A CONSTITUTIVE LINK BETWEEN SELF-ASCRPTION AND OTHER- ASCRPTION

Self-conscious thoughts are conceptual thoughts. On Strawson's view, self-conscious thoughts must involve deploying the quasi-linguistic concept of "I." Animals that are unable to deploy this quasi-linguistic concept, Strawson claims, do not count as having genuine self-consciousness (105).

According to Evans (1982), conceptual thoughts obey a rule that he calls the Generality Constraint. According to the Generality Constraint, if one can deploy the concept of being *F* and think that an object *a* is *F*, one must have the conceptual resources to think that *b* is *F*, *c* is *F*, etc., where *b* and *c* are objects other than *a* (101-102). On this view, one who can ascribe a predicate to oneself must also be able to ascribe such a predicate to other distinct subjects. Predicates, thus, are inherently general. I take this view to imply that one who is able to ascribe a predicate to oneself must also be able to ascribe such a predicate to subjects other than oneself. Thus, self-ascription is constitutively linked to other-ascription.

Evans develops his Generality Constraint from P. F. Strawson's view. Unlike P. F. Strawson, who does not say much about the link between self-ascription and other-ascription, Evans provides more explanations for it. According to Evans, "any thought which we can interpret as having the content that *a* is *F* involves the exercise of an ability—*knowledge of what it is for something to be F*—which can be exercised in indefinitely many distinct thoughts, and would be exercised in, for instance, the thought that *b* is *F*" (103, emphasis added).

I take Evans' point to imply that the ability to self-ascribe mental features and the ability to ascribe mental features to others involve the same ability, the ability to know what it is for someone to have those mental features. This point provides further support for the constitutive

link between self-ascription and other-ascription. MSC, which involves self-ascription must also involve other-ascription, for self- and other-ascription are grounded in the same ability. MSC then must involve a conception of other subjects of experience. It follows that COT' is true. In what follows, I will consider Strawson's possible objections and provide my responses.

### 3.1 Other-Ascription

I've drawn on Evans' Generality Constraint to elaborate on the constitutive link between self-ascription and other-ascription. However, Strawson may argue that the inference from the Generality Constraint to the constitutive link between self- and other-ascription is too hasty. He may argue that even if it is true that one who is able to ascribe a predicate to oneself must also be able to ascribe such a predicate to other distinct subjects, it seems that one can ascribe the predicate to distinct subjects at different points in time who are all oneself. It then follows that Strawson can grant Evans' Generality Constraint but in the meantime hold that there is not a constitutive link between self-ascription and other-ascription.<sup>5</sup> He can thus maintain that MSC does not involve a conception of subjects other than oneself, and thus COT' is false.<sup>6</sup>

However, I don't think that Strawson can defend his position (i.e., there is no constitutive link between self- and other-ascription) by arguing that the Generality Constraint can be satisfied by ascribing predicates to distinct subjects at different points in time who are all oneself. It is unclear whether a subject's being at different points in time can be counted as genuinely distinct subjects. It may be true that, for instance, me-at-high-school and me-at-college are different in certain important aspects. Nevertheless, it seems that both of them are me.

---

<sup>5</sup> Here, some may point out that it is unclear whether, on Strawson's view, my past or future selves do not count as "others" for my current self. I think that although Strawson does hold that my past or future selves are not identical to my current self, all of them are me in the sense that they are located in the same persisting body.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bermúdez 2000.

Strawson may explain this point with his Transience View of the self (Strawson 2009). According to the Transience View, mental selves or subjects are “short-lived or transient,” and each exists within “a temporal period of a synergy of neural activity” (273). On this view, not only is it the case that me-at-high-school and me-at-college are ontologically different subjects, but me-an-hour-ago and me-now are also ontologically different subjects. The feeling of having a persisting mental self is merely an illusion. It seems to follow from this Transience View that a subject’s being at different points in time are genuinely distinct subjects.

However, I don’t think that Strawson can draw on his Transience View of the self to argue that Generality Constraint does not entail a constitutive link between self- and other-ascription, and uses this argument to reject COT’. On my view, Strawson’s Transience View presupposes the mental self view. Using the Transience View to argue against COT’ and thereby defend the mental self view will then be begging the question.

Strawson’s Transience View presupposes his mental self view since he holds that although selves are transient, we have a sense of the persisting self. Although he argues that this sense of the persisting self is simply an illusion, he nevertheless needs something persistent for grounding such an illusion. This something is an embodied self or what he calls “the human being as a whole,” which is a subject of experience that has both mental and bodily aspects. Since the illusion of the persisting self is grounded in the embodied self, the transient selves then cannot be the embodied selves. It then follows that the transient selves must be the mental selves. In other words, Strawson needs to take transient selves as mental selves in order for holding that they are transient.

Strawson, thus, cannot use the Transience View to argue that one’s selves at different points in time count as distinct subjects and that the Generality Constraint does not entail a

constitutive link between self- and other-ascription. Here, Strawson may go ahead and accept that the Generality Constraint entails that there is a constitutive link between self- and other-ascription. However, there is such a link only in the sense that when one is able to self-ascribe mental features, one then has some conceptual resources to *develop* the ability to ascribe mental features to others. However, such an ability may have not yet been developed. One then does not have an actual ability to ascribe mental features to others. Strawson can thus hold that self-ascription has priority over other-ascription. Then, it follows that even if it is true that the Generality Constraint entails a constitutive link between self- and other-ascription, COT' may still be false. Given that there is a possibility for a self-ascriber to have no actual ability to ascribe mental features to others, it seems that a self-ascriber may have no conception of other subjects. Thus, MSC, the form of self-consciousness that involves consciousness of oneself solely as one's mental aspects, may involve no conception of other subjects of experience. I will consider Strawson's such possible objection in section 3.2.

### **3.2 Self-Ascription, Priority, and Thought-Elements**

Strawson indeed holds that self-ascription has priority over other-ascription. As he claims, it is arguable that the most one can say about self-consciousness is, if one is self-conscious, "one must have the ability—the mental resources—to come to possess and deploy some conception of other subjects of experience" (122). However, having the ability to *come to possess and deploy* some conception of other subjects of experience does not entail that one actually has a conception of other subjects of experience. One may have the potential to develop such a conception, but for some reasons the conception has not yet been developed.

However, if Strawson argues that self-ascription has priority over other-ascription by holding that a self-conscious being may not have the actual ability to conceive of other subjects,

I argue, Strawson will then end up undermining his mental self view. But before I can put forward my argument, I have to explain Strawson's view on the constituents of self-conscious thoughts.

Strawson has a cognitive-experiential or cognitive-phenomenological view on self-conscious thoughts (Strawson 2009, also see Strawson 2011). He argues that self-conscious thoughts, just like our sensory experiences, have experiential or phenomenological characters. That is to say, he holds that not only is it the case that there is what it is like for us to have certain sensory experiences, but also there is what it is like for us to have self-conscious thoughts. Self-conscious thoughts, on this view, are constituted by what he calls "thought-elements" or "experience-structuring mental elements" (44). Strawson holds that our experiences have certain structure, and thought-elements are just the structural elements of our experiences. He also maintains that those elements which allow us not only to *experience* things but also *conceptualize* things in certain ways (Strawson 2009, 44, n. 40).

According to Strawson, a self-conscious being must have the following thought-elements: (a) the thought-element of subject of experience, (b) the thought-element of oneself, and (c) some conception of experience (118-120).<sup>7</sup> The reason is that, first of all, self-consciousness involves a conception of the self, a subject of experience-as-single-mental-thing. A self-conscious being thus must have the thought-element of subject of experience. Second, if a being has a thought-element of subject of experience, the being must also have some grasp of experience, and thus have some conception of experience. Third, self-consciousness is

---

<sup>7</sup> The thought-element of oneself is different from the thought-element of subject of experience since it is possible for one to deploy the thought-element of subject of experience without deploying the thought-element of oneself. For example, one may think of a person as a subject of experience without thinking of that person as oneself.

essentially related to the entertainment of first-person thoughts, such as the thought “I’m thinking” (Castañeda 1966, Perry 1979). Thus, a self-conscious being must have the thought-element of “I” or oneself.

Furthermore, Strawson claims that if one has the thought-element of oneself, one must also have (d) the thought-element of not-oneself (119). It seems that one cannot be said to conceive of something as oneself unless one can also conceive of some other thing as not-oneself, just like one cannot really be said to know what is “up” unless one also knows what is “down.”

Equipped with (a) the thought-element of subject of experience and (d) the thought-element of not-oneself, Strawson claims, a self-conscious being then has the conceptual resources to *form* the thought-element of something that is both a subject of experience and is not-oneself, that is, the thought-element of other subjects of experience. However, he argues that it does not follow from the fact that one has the conceptual resources to form the thought-element of other subjects of experience that one *actually possesses and deploys* the thought-element of other subjects of experience (122). It follows from Strawson’s claim that a self-conscious being who is capable of self-ascription may nevertheless lack an actual conception of other subjects of experience. Thus, self-ascription has priority over other-ascription.

However, I question Strawson’s reasoning regarding having (a) the thought-element of subject of experience and (d) the thought-element of not-oneself does not entail having a thought-element of not-oneself. I argue that when one has the thought-element of subject of experience and the thought-element of not-oneself, one then has the thought-element of other subjects of experience. When one has the ability to conceive of subject of experience and not-oneself, one then has the ability to conceive of something both as a subject of experience and as

not-oneself. It follows that one has an actual ability to conceive of something as another subject of experience, and thus have a thought-element of other subjects of experience. There is no reason to believe that having thought-elements (a) and (d) does not entail having their combination.

Moreover, it seems to follow from the Generality Constraint that having the thought-elements (a) and (d) entails having their combination as well. According to the Generality Constraint, if one has the ability to ascribe a predicate such as ‘is feeling pain’ to oneself and think “I’m feeling pain,” one must also have the ability to ascribe such a predicate to another subject S and think “S is feeling pain.” It then follows that one must actually have the thought-element of other subjects of experience. Thus, Strawson cannot argue that self-ascription has priority over other-ascription by claiming that a self-conscious being lacks an actual possession of the thought-element of other subjects of experience.

I thus hold that self-ascription does not have priority over other-ascription and that there is a constitutive link between self-ascription and other-ascription. Because of such a constitutive link, self-consciousness must involve a conception of other subjects of experience. Thus, MSC, consciousness of oneself solely in one’s mental aspects, must involve a conception of other subjects, and therefore COT’ is true. If COT’ is true and MSC involves other-ascription, then, according to P. F. Strawson’s theory of persons, MSC must involve a conception of oneself not just in one’s mental aspects but also in one’s bodily aspects, since one must have a sense of relevant bodily features in order to ascribe the mental features to others.

### **3.3 Self-Ascription, Thought-Elements, and Full-Fledged Concepts**

I’ve argued that if one has the thought-elements that allow one to self-ascribe mental features, one must have the thought-elements that allow one to ascribe such mental features to others. If

Strawson wants to defend his position that having the thought-element of subject of experience and the thought-element of not-oneself does not entail having a thought-element of other subjects of experience, Strawson needs to provide more arguments. I think there is still one possible way for Strawson to defend his position. I will consider this possibility in what follows.

Strawson can argue that for one to have the thought-element of other subjects, there is a condition that one needs to satisfy. However, it is possible for one to have the thought-element of subject of experience and the thought-element of not-oneself but fail to satisfy such a condition. Going back to Evans' Generality Constraint, we can see that the constitutive link between the ability to self-ascribe mental features and the ability to ascribe such mental features to others is grounded in the ability to *know* what it is for someone to have certain mental features. Strawson can then argue that for one to be able to have the thought-element of other subjects and ascribe mental features to others, one needs to satisfy the condition of knowing what it is for someone to have certain mental features, which is quite conceptually demanding. Strawson can argue that to know what it is for someone to have certain mental features, one must have some full-fledged concepts of those mental features. However, it is possible that a self-ascriber does not have full-fledged concepts of mental features. Thus, a self-ascriber, who has the thought-element of oneself and the thought-element of subject of experience, may still be unable to ascribe mental features to others, and therefore does not have the thought-element of other subjects.

Is it really possible for a self-ascriber to have no full-fledged concepts of the mental features which one ascribes to oneself? Is it possible for one who is able to think "I'm feeling depressed," for example, to not have a full-fledged concept of feeling depressed? For Strawson, in order for one to think that "I'm feeling depressed," one only needs to have "some conception" of feeling depressed. So the question here is what Strawson's "having some conception" means.

Strawson is in fact quite ambivalent about his notion of having some conception of experience here. He is not clear about whether having some conception of experience amounts to having the thought-element of experience. He claims that he uses 'some conception of experience' since 'some conception of experience' is looser than 'the thought-element of experience' in the sense that "the latter seems more likely to invite the objection that self-consciousness does not obviously require possession of any *general* concept of experience...that goes beyond (a) having visual and auditory experience, say, and (b) being fully self-conscious with all that entails. But this, perhaps, is not very satisfactory" (121, n. 30).

But even if having some conception of experience amounts to having some thought-element of experience, and thus to think "I'm feeling depressed," one needs to have the thought-element of feeling depressed, there is still room for Strawson to argue that one nevertheless does not need to have some full-fledged concept of feeling depressed. On Strawson's view, thought-elements include a wide range of things, and full-fledged concepts are just a part of them. As I mentioned in section 3.2, Strawson defines thought-elements as "experience-structuring mental elements" (44). In the introduction of his book, he mentions that he understands "structuring" in "a wide sense according to which any contribution to the character of experience is a contribution to its structure" (2). His thought-elements thus include not only concepts, but also moods and emotional dispositions, and even some "determinants of the experiential character of experience that are neither moods nor cognitive formations" that creatures such as newborn babies can be said to have an experience of pain without plausibly being taken to have some full-fledged concept of pain (2). Strawson's notion of thought-element thus allows one to have thought-element of certain experience without having the full-fledged concept of such experience. Thus, since one can have the thought-element of certain experience without having

the full-fledged concept of such experience, one is then unable to know what it is for someone to have such experience. And since one does not know what it is for someone to have such experience, the condition of Evans' Generality Constraint is not met. Strawson can thus defend his position such that having the thought-element of subject of experience and the thought-element of not oneself does not imply having the thought-element of other subjects and that there is not a constitutive link between self-ascription and other-ascription.

However, if Strawson defends his position by arguing that one can have the thought-element of certain experience without having the full-fledged concept of such experience, I think he will run into a problem with his mental self view. If such kind of thought-elements, the kind that one can have without having some full-fledged concepts, is what Strawson has in mind when he argues that self-consciousness involves a conception of the mental self, then it seems that his overall mental self view will be undermined. The reason his mental self view will be undermined is that it is unclear what this sense of having a conception of the mental would mean. It seems that, on this understanding, having a conception of the mental amounts to just having some experiences, which are essential mental. But such notion of having a conception of the mental seems to be dissatisfying.

When Strawson explains what it means to have a thought-element or a conception of the mental, he says, "for something to be figured as mental is for it to feature in experience in a way that simply does not require possession of anything like the fully-fledged concept" (68). He suggests that to experience something as mental in this way is just like experiencing something as colored that a neonate does without having a concept of color (68). However, it is hard to see how the mental can "feature in experience" in the same way that colors do.

It seems that Strawson, here, is appealing to an intuition that there are some phenomena that are directly presented to us as featuring in mental states, such as thoughts, feelings, etc., whereas some other phenomena are presented to us as featuring in bodily states, such as proprioception. Strawson thus may argue that to have a conception of the mental in the way that neonates have a conception of the color is just to have a grasp of a difference between mental phenomena and bodily awareness, just like neonates may have a grasp of different colors in their perceptual experiences. However, this claim relies solely on an intuition that there is something that is mental which is distinctive from the body. But without a theoretical account of how the conception of the mental is different from the conception of the body, Strawson's view then does not provide a satisfactory account of the mental self that can counter the embodied self view.

### 3.4 Conclusion

I've explained Strawson's view of our ordinary conception of the self, which is a subject of experience-as-single-mental-thing. I then turned to Strawson's notion of a minimal form of self-consciousness, or MSC. Strawson argues that MSC is consciousness of oneself *solely in one's mental aspects*, and that MSC involves a conception of *the self* since it involves a conception of oneself as a subject of experience-as-single-mental-thing. Thus, MSC involves a conception of oneself as a mental self. I then objected to Strawson's mental self view by drawing on P. F. Strawson's theory of persons. I argued that MSC, which necessarily involves self-ascription, must involve a conception of oneself as having a body. Moreover, and more importantly, it is because there is a constitutive link between self-ascription and other-ascription that MSC involves a conception of oneself as having a body. I then turned to COT', the thesis that MSC must involve a conception of other subjects of experience, to discuss Strawson's response to P. F. Strawson's challenge. I pointed out that Strawson's objection to COT' does not really address

the issue about the constitutive link between self-ascription and other-ascription. I then drew on Evans' Generality Constraint to further illustrate on such constitutive link and argue for COT'. I then held that MSC must involve a conception of other subjects and thereby maintained that MSC involves a conception of oneself not just in one's mental aspects but also in one's bodily aspects. Thus, Strawson fails to establish his mental self view.

I then considered and replied to several possible objections. I argued that if Strawson defends his position against COT' by claiming that self-conscious thoughts do not necessarily obey the Generality Constraint, and does so by arguing that a self-ascriber may ascribe mental features to distinct subjects at different points in time who are all oneself, then he will end up begging the question. Furthermore, if Strawson opts to argue that self-ascription has priority over other ascription, and does so by arguing that MSC does not involve full-fledged concepts of the experiences one ascribe to oneself, then he will end up weakening his mental self view. I thus conclude that Strawson fails to provide a satisfactory account of the mental self that can counter the embodied self view.

I think examining Strawson's mental self view and how his view is opposed to the embodied self view reveals that our notion of the self is complex and involves quite a few conceptual preconditions, such as conceiving of oneself as a single thing and conceiving of others as subjects of experience. Knowing about those conceptual preconditions and how they are satisfied may help us understand how we develop the ability to think of ourselves as selves and how our conception of the body and the conception of others contribute to this ability.

## REFERENCES

- Bermúdez, José L. 2000. *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*. MIT Press.
- Bermúdez, José L., Marcel, Anthony J., and Eilan, Naomi. 1995. *The Body and the Self*. MIT Press.
- Brewer, Bill. 1995. “Bodily Awareness and the Self.” In *The Body and the Self*, edited by José L. Bermúdez, Anthony J. Marcel, and Naomi Eila, 291-309. MIT Press.
- Campbell, John. 1995. *Past, Space, and Self*. MIT Press.
- Cassam, Quassim. 1997. *Self and World*. Oxford University Press.
- Castañeda, Hector-Neri. 1966. “‘He’: A Study in the Logic of Self-Consciousness.” *Ratio* 8: 130-157.
- Evans, Gareth. 1982. *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford University Press.
- Perry, John. 1979. “The Problem of the Essential Indexical.” *Noûs*: 3-21.
- Ryle, Gilbert. 1949. *The Concept of Mind*. London: Hutchinson.
- Strawson, Galen. 2009. *Selves: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics*. Oxford University Press.
- . 2011. Cognitive Phenomenology: Real Life. In *Cognitive Phenomenology*, edited by Tim Bayne and Michelle Montague, 285-325. Oxford University Press.
- Strawson, P. F. 1959. *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. Routledge.