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Introduction to the Special Session of the Consciousness Online Conference:

On the Developmental Conditions of Self-Consciousness: Historical Development

I am pleased to introduce the special session of the Fourth Consciousness Online Conference called “The Developmental Conditions of Self-Consciousness.” In a recent article of mine published in the journal Philosophical Psychology, called "On the Joint Engagement of Persons: Self-Consciousness, the Symmetry Thesis and Person Perception," I discuss the developmental conditions of self-consciousness. An assumption I make in that paper is that the nature of self-consciousness can be understood through an investigation of the developmental conditions of self-consciousness.

In making that assumption explicit, I have discovered that ‘development’ is said in many ways, which is the inspiration for this session of the conference. ‘Development’ sometimes makes one think of the work of immediate post-Kantians, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. In many ways, thinking about the mind— and self-consciousness in particular— as dependent upon developmental conditions arises in this period, as I will discuss below. ‘Development’ sometimes makes one think of the work of evolutionary biologists and psychologists. According to this notion, investigation into the nature of self-consciousness requires investigation into the evolution of self-consciousness. Maybe

more often than the others, ‘development’ makes one think of the work of developmental psychologists. According to this notion of development, understanding the nature of self-consciousness involves thinking about the development of self-consciousness in infancy and childhood.

It is reflection on these diverse notions that has inspired me to investigate the developmental conditions of self-consciousness in an interdisciplinary context. The concept of development might be understood in at least three ways:

1) historical development
2) phylogenetic development
3) ontogenetic development

These three concepts are in no way exclusive or exhaustive of the concept of development; however, I have found it heuristically useful to engage in an inquiry into the developmental conditions of self-consciousness through these three concepts.

I have organized different sub-sessions that parallel these concepts. In this brief introduction, I will outline some historical arguments for the dependence of self-consciousness upon developmental conditions, broadly understood, with the purpose of considering the first sense. But, first allow me to introduce the other sub-sessions. I want to express my gratitude to all of the speakers and commentators for participating and I am looking forward to the conversation throughout the two-week period.

In the second sub-session, I am pleased to welcome Dr. Peter Carruthers (Professor of Philosophy at University of Maryland), Logan Fletcher, and J. Brendan Ritchie (both graduate students at University of Maryland) who will focus on the evolution of self-consciousness in the paper “Evolving Self-Consciousness.” I am also

pleased to welcome Dr. Joel Smith, Lecturer of Philosophy at the University of Manchester and Dr. JeeLoo Liu, Associate Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Fullerton as commentators. In the third sub-session, I am pleased to welcome Dr. Radu Bogdan (Professor of Philosophy and Director of Cognitive Studies at Tulane University) who will focus on the infant-childhood development of self-consciousness in the paper "Self-Consciousness: Executive Design, Sociocultural Grounds." I am also pleased to welcome as commentators Dr. Robert Lurz Professor of Philosophy at Brooklyn College, CUNY, Kyle Ferguson, graduate student in Philosophy at the Graduate Center, CUNY, and Henry Shevlin graduate student in Philosophy at the Graduate Center, CUNY. I would like to thank Henry Shevlin for offering to be a commentator on such short notice.

I should say that both Carruthers' *et al* and Bogdan's papers have very many interesting claims to make about each of the three senses of developmental that I have set out above. Further, I am looking forward to the conversation that develops out of these papers throughout the conference. Before I outline the historical arguments, I want to register a few caveats:

1) I do not intend this discussion of historical arguments to serve as an introduction to the particular claims and arguments in the other sub-sessions; I am not claiming that the other papers are best understood in light of these historical arguments, for instance. Instead, I am offering a historical background for the inspiration for the special session in general.

2) I am not endorsing the historical arguments as sound arguments, but instead merely providing an outline of those arguments as a backdrop for the question of concern

of the special session, namely whether thinking about the nature of self-consciousness should necessarily involve investigation of the developmental conditions of self-consciousness. I take this to be an open question about what our methodological approach to self-consciousness ought to be.

My main concern is to make clear and precise how the positions and arguments of such historical figures can be amenable to developing an interdisciplinary account of self-consciousness, and one that justifies the assumption that the nature of self-consciousness should be understood in terms of its developmental conditions. I will outline the arguments from Johann Gottlieb Fichte, George Herbert Mead, and Peter Strawson. Throughout the discussion, I will call the conclusion that self-consciousness has developmental conditions (understood broadly) "The Others Thesis."

Since the figures and arguments offered below would be difficult to discuss in their own terms, I will skate over interpretative issues and outline the arguments in broad brush strokes. Further, I do not critique these arguments here, but merely provide the arguments as a sketch of the types of arguments that serve as a background. Throughout the discussion, I hope to make several points of contact between these historical arguments and the claims and arguments of the session.

Generally, the most famous argument for *the Others Thesis* is found in Hegel's (1977, pp. 104–138) The Phenomenology of Spirit. As far as distinctively philosophical arguments for an interpersonal conception of the self, of course, Hegel's account of the relation between self and other as characterized by the master-slave dialectic can be read as a defense of a version of *the Others Thesis*. While I admire Hegel's holistic and systematic approach to metaphysics, for the purpose of inquiry into self-consciousness

and *the Others Thesis*, his approach makes it rather difficult to enter into a dialogue about the topic.

There is a recent trend in the philosophy of mind, consciousness and self-consciousness in making sidelong references to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit as the historical source of inspiration for views about the developmental conditions of self-consciousness. In "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", Sellars (1953) suggests that his attack on the Myth of the Given and his intersubjective account of the logic of 'looks' talk could be understood as a *Meditations Hegelienne*.

John McDowell (1994) and Robert Brandom (1994), two philosophers inspired by Sellars work in philosophy of mind, make appeals to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit as pivotal inspirations for their accounts. John McDowell calls Mind and World a prolegomena to the Phenomenology of Spirit and Robert Brandom's interpretation of Hegel is at implicit in his articulation of the intersubjective space of reasons and explicit in his forthcoming commentary on Hegel's masterpiece.

In a different context, Tyler Burge's classic argument for social externalism in "Individualism and the Mental" opens with the following statement: "Since Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a broad, inarticulate division of emphasis between the individual and his social environment has marked philosophical discussions of mind." Burge goes on to identify a division between, on the one hand, Cartesians and behaviorists whose analyses of mind consider the individual as separate from any social environment and, on the other hand, the "Hegelian preoccupation" with situating the individual and its mindedness in a social context.

There are certainly other instances, but suffice it to say, the historical source of these hand-waving gestures is Hegel's social, cultural, and developmental model of self-consciousness that begins with the master-slave dialectic, the pivotal chapter of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. If it is not the immediate source of developmental models of self-consciousness, it is the paradigm-shifting text that ushered in an intersubjective model of self-consciousness, however as we will suggest on the backs of his predecessors, especially Fichte.

Instead of Hegel, I will discuss Fichte as the central German Idealist figure to argue for *the Others Thesis*. It could be argued that Hegel's account of self and other is already implicit in Fichte's writing (Beiser (2002, pp. 341–3)). Most take the section entitled 'self-consciousness' in The Phenomenology of Spirit to be the first argument that self-consciousness depends upon awareness of others. However, J. G. Fichte's (2000) Foundations of Natural Right contains the first explicit argument for *the Others Thesis*.

In that text, Fichte is attempting to provide an account of the conditions of self-consciousness. His account of self-consciousness is meant to achieve two basic purposes. On the one hand, Fichte argues that self-consciousness necessarily involves a distinction between "the I" and "the not-I." On the other hand, Fichte wants to preserve the pivotal relations between being a rational being and being a self-conscious being, namely that by being capable of reflection upon oneself thereby one is able to act in terms of laws and principles. For instance, if I were to act on the principle that I should only do to others what I can at the same time universalize as an action towards all others, I would have to have the capacity to reflect on my own actions. Thus, he suggests that by being a rational being, one is thereby capable of self-consciousness (an idea that was merely implicit in

Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative). Fichte also follows Kant in thinking that self-consciousness is fundamentally an activity of the subject. What exactly is this self-activity? Self-activity is a constructive process that is governed by rules or principles of synthesis. Kant suggests, 'we can represent nothing as combined in the object without having previously combined it ourselves, and that among all representations **combination** is the only one that is not given through objects but can be executed only by the subject itself, since it is an act of its self-activity' (1781, §B130).

Fichte takes this position farther and argues that self-consciousness a type of mental action, what he calls 'self-activity.' For Fichte, self-consciousness is the activity of a creature positing itself as self-positing, or positing itself as a being in the world. According to Fichte, the I posits itself as self-positing, by which he means that the individual of self-consciousness is conscious of itself as a self-determining individual. This is the first principle of Fichte's philosophical system, that the individual is an activity of bringing itself into existence.

It follows from this view that there is not an agent prior to positing and there is not a product posterior to positing that is not itself that activity of self-synthesis. But, Fichte reasoned, the positing of "the I" cannot be understood as a purely creative force that brings about all experience for the individual, because the not-I exists independently as a material and sensible world, as Kant's refutation of idealism (1781, §§ B274–294) had showed. Thus, it is a necessary condition of the self-positing I that there be a not-I, namely, the not-self or the material and sensible world. However, the argument continues, if the material and sensible not-I constrained "the I", then the individual would lack all freedom and self-sufficiency, and this is implausible, given the centrality of

Fichte's first principle. Since "the I" is self-activity, then "the I" must maintain its freedom and self-sufficiency: it must be a subject that posits itself through the activity of synthesis, rather than being constrained by an external material world.

However, this provides Fichte with a dilemma. If the not-I is assumed to be a material or sensible force that constrains the I, then the I is determined (which goes against the first principle); however, if the freedom and self-sufficiency of the I is left unchecked, then the I will be allowed to create or produce the not-I, and hence become infinitely creative (which is absurd). Therefore, Fichte reasons, the concept of a self-positing individual requires the concept of the summons by other beings to become self-conscious, which must come from outside that self-positing individual (the condition for what I call 'recognition'). According to Fichte, the rational Other summons the individual to become self-conscious and at the same time asserts a check (the condition for what I call 'acknowledgement') upon that individual to respect the rational Other in generating theoretical and practical rules and principles. The summons and check is what makes possible self-consciousness and can only arise assuming that the individual is aware of rational Others. Therefore, Fichte's argument suggests that self-consciousness depends upon awareness of others, in this case awareness of other rational beings, and in this sense his argument supports the Others Thesis.

Another historical argument for *the Others Thesis* can be found in the work of George Herbert Mead, especially in his lectures Mind, Self and Society. According to Mead (1934), self-consciousness is an awareness of oneself as an object, however, it is an indirect object of experience. A creature can only be self-conscious by being aware of an object, but this object cannot be directly experienced. Mead suggests that self-

consciousness is neither a reflection upon oneself in introspection, nor the perception of oneself as one's body. Mead argues that the chief way in which we can become aware of an object is through linguistic gestures called "the conversation of gestures." For example, the chief way we become aware of a tree is through an individual's referring to that tree.

Further, Mead conceives of the conversation of gestures as a rule-governed activity similar to a game, which cannot be played by one individual alone. One cannot play the game of "the conversation of gestures" and refer to a tree unless one recognizes that there are others that refer to trees and acknowledges the constraints upon that reference (It may be helpful to compare and contrast Davidson's notion of triangulation with Mead's notion of 'the conversation of gestures.') This principle does not apply only to objects, but also applies to awareness of oneself as an object. One cannot be aware of oneself through a gesture towards oneself unless one is or has been aware of some other's gesture towards oneself as that public object. According to Mead, "[the individual self] can enter as an object to himself only on the basis of social relations and interactions, only by means of his experiential transactions with other individuals in an organized social environment" (1934, p. 225). The individual is an object for others first and only through the linguistic interactions with others becomes a self-conscious individual. Therefore, Mead's argument suggests that self-consciousness depends upon awareness of others, in this case awareness of the linguistic gestures of others towards oneself, and as such his argument supports the Others Thesis.

Peter Strawson (1959) discusses self-ascription explicitly with the following claim: "it is a necessary condition of one's ascribing states of consciousness, experiences

to oneself, in the way one does, that one should also ascribe them, or be prepared to ascribe them, to others who are not oneself" (1959, p. 94). This glimpse of a thesis and argument occurs in the context of P. F. Strawson's defense of the idea that the concept of a person is an indispensable concept ("a major logical type or categories of individuals") for any descriptive ontology that admits states of consciousness. So, although P. F. Strawson provides a methodological framework for an argument against individualism about self-consciousness, he can only provide details with respect to the acceptance of the argument about persons. But, even with such a limited scope the argument is revealing.

According to Strawson, self-consciousness is the self-ascription of experiential predicates to oneself. For example, if Solo were to be self-conscious, then he would need to be able to ascribe the predicate of having a headache. Strawson argues that in order to be able to ascribe the predicate of having a headache, one needs to master the application of that predicate. Mastery of the predicate requires that the predicate have generality and unity in its application, which means that Strawson's account is a criteriological account. According to Strawson, one cannot master the application of that predicate unless one is capable of applying the predicate of having a headache to another individual. Therefore, in order for one to be able to ascribe predicates to oneself one must be able to ascribe predicates to others. Strawson's argument suggests that self-consciousness depends upon awareness of others, in this case the awareness of others possessing the predicates that are ascribed in self-consciousness as self-ascription. Further, the ascription of experiential predicates to oneself as a subject cannot be conceived to occur unless we understand such ascription in the context of the practice of ascribing mental state predicates to other

subjects construed as persons, human beings, or people that take up the same form of life as the subject.

Strawson's argument is meant to oppose individualism about self-consciousness— that a self-conscious subject does not need to rely on other individuals to be conscious of itself as itself or its mental states as its own. Strawson argues that there is a central type of interpersonal relation that mediates the relation between a self-conscious individual and its awareness of other subjects, namely, the concept of a person. So, to the extent that the other subject is a person, it is argued that when one is aware of a person, then one is aware of another subject. However, it should not be supposed that the relation between self and other should be understood solely as a relation between persons, between individuals as human beings and other subjects as other human beings. So, P. F. Strawson's arguments appear to support versions of *the Others Thesis*.

I have not criticized the truth of the premises or the logic of these arguments, because I hope that in the discussion such arguments may be central to the conversation. Again, I want to thank the speakers and commentators for participating; I have learned a great deal from reading their papers and the background material. Throughout the two week period, I invite conference attendees to reflect on the intersections between these concepts of developmental conditions and the arguments and evidence for *the Others thesis*.