

The Behavioral, Experiential and Conceptual Dimensions of Selfhood:
Introducing a new phenomenological approach to studying the self

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Abstract

The self has become a prominent field of research in psychology but despite its eminent first-person character, it is typically studied from a third-person perspective. Such a third-person approach is well-suited to enquire into the behavioral expression of the sense of selfhood but it does not capture the core-experience – the so-called qualia-nature – of the self. In the current article we illuminate the challenges that a predominant third-person approach poses to an understanding of the self. We outline two levels of analysis that can complement and enrich a third-person, behavior-focused view, namely the level of experience and the level of conceptual insight. Both these additional levels are accessible via a first-person mode of enquiry and can reveal a level of richness about the self that reaches beyond a third-person approach. We here provide a methodological justification for such a qualitative mode of enquiry, as well as a synopsis of findings from our own first-person research which involved introspective reports of the authors' experiences during meditation on geometrical shapes, words, and short phrases.

The Behavioral, Experiential and Conceptual Dimensions of the Self

Psychologists rarely concern themselves with the linguistic properties of individual words. Sometimes this can be an unfortunate omission – for instance, when it comes to the peculiarities of the word “I”. In many languages the concept of the “I” is expressed in a relatively short word, often comprising just one, two or three letters – a succinctness in terminology that is perhaps a reflection of the closeness we have to our I. In English the “I” is even capitalized, further underlining its prominence as an Archimedean point amongst the various relationships with the people and objects around us. Another peculiarity, now universal across languages, is that it is the only word that can relate to only a single referent – namely the speaker/writer who uses it. Mind you that everyone can use this word for their own purpose; but everyone can use it only for *one* purpose, taking reference to only a single being – namely him- or herself.

When we speak of our “I” we speak of a something that nobody else has access to. One might hence expect that the natural way to approach this something is by means of an enquiry into the inwardly and immediately accessible world of first-person experience. Not so in psychology, however. Here, the word “I” is typically avoided and instead the term “self” is used, perhaps making it more accessible to observation from outside to begin with (we can also speak of “himself” or “her-self” and no change in perspective is thus necessary; note that in the following both terms will be used, partly in order to allow for consistency with the quoted material). In the scholarly community, the self as a stand-alone concept is often avoided to begin with – instead, hyphenated compound words are used that no longer have this exclusive self-referential stand-alone character mentioned above but instead point to the sub-components of selfhood that are outwardly measurable facets or expressions of the concept of self, e.g., self-efficacy, self-determination, self-rated health; self-harm; self-monitoring; self-regulatory goals; self-care; self-

regulation; and many others. The compound descriptions constitute the primary research-focus in academic psychology today; research on the one who experiences these signature-components, by contrast, is rare (Klein, 2014) – with few exceptions.

Baumeister (1998), for instance, speaks of the reflexive dimension of the self which includes the ability to reflect on and control one's own cognition (i.e. metacognition) and is thus perhaps most closely associated with what we experience as the self (Baumeister, 1998, p.680ff). And yet, the focus on third-person research in Baumeister's synopsis falls short of appreciating the core qualitative nature of the self ("the self cannot be perceived directly"; Baumeister, 1998, p. 692); in contrast, we propose that this quality becomes accessible in first-person experience – and should hence be studied and explored in that way (for more recent overviews on the self, see Baumeister, 2011; Jonas, Stroebe, Hewstone, 2014, p.141-195; Leary & Hoyle, 2010, part VI).

In the following we thus argue that a primary third-person approach does not do justice to the core phenomenology of the self and that other approaches – namely an enquiry into the experiential reality of this entity – would allow for a more genuine understanding and an in-depth characterization of the concept of self. In paying attention to this *experiential* character of the self, another level also becomes noticeable: we gain *insights* into the self – for instance into the conditions under which the self is experienced more strongly vs. more faintly; or into how the experience of the self depends on the nature of relationships that we establish regarding different objects or beings, e.g. regarding other people (e.g., how do self-related qualities of a relationship based on trust differ from one based on suspicion). These insights depend on the individual only to the extent that we become aware of them in our conscious experience; the state of being into which an insight is gained, by contrast, is not dependent on the individual. This is even more obvious when it comes to qualities beyond the self, such as the laws of physics or mathematics.

Here, the experiential level ('how is it for me to ponder over this state of being') can be clearly differentiated from the level of conceptual insight into the respective being ('what is the nature or conceptual content of this being like). Regarding the self – but also regarding all other psychological phenomena – we thus distinguish between the level of behavior on the one hand which can be accessed through third-person observation; and two further levels on the other hand – the level of experience and the level of insight as a specific form of experience and as an expression of lawfulness (cf. Steiner 1904/1911). Both can be accessed and studied through first-person enquiry. We will come back to this distinction in more detail later on.

In the following we will pursue and document such an approach of first-person enquiry and provide an overview over what we see as deeper and more subtle layers that can enrich our understanding of the self beyond what we can study through third-person observation (which includes methods based on questionnaires and interviews). We structure our account into four sections: First, we will outline more carefully how and why a third-person approach is of limited value in capturing the core of the self; second, we will investigate why it is often considered suspicious to instead take the more obvious first-person approach to studying the self – and whether these suspicions are warranted; third, we will elaborate on the reasons for why such a first-person approach is important; and finally, we will outline a methodological protocol on how to acquaint ourselves with the experiential and conceptual dimension of the self, also pursuing and documenting the outcomes of a trial that we conducted to scrutinize our account in a more rigorous and systematic manner.

Third-person approaches do not capture the core of the self

In researching the literature on the theme we noticed different inconsistencies and misconception in the approach to the self which are often tacitly accepted but which nonetheless distort our relationship to this core concept, both inside academic research and beyond. One category of inconsistencies refers to ontological misconceptions – i.e. misconceptions about the nature of the self. A second category of inconsistencies refers to methodological misconceptions – i.e. misconceptions about how to research the self. In each category we noticed particular types of misconceptions which we will introduce below.

Ontological Misconceptions

We noticed two types of ontological misconceptions. The first consists of cases where the self is denied to begin with – but nonetheless manifests implicitly in the respective theory. The second is that the self is introduced as a concept, i.e. it is already explicitly acknowledged – but as a cognitive/behavioral representation that has no reality other than being a mental construct.

The self as a psychological reality is denied

One distortion in dealing with the self is to deny its existence to begin with. In his book “The ego tunnel: The science of the mind and the myth of the self”, Metzinger (2009) states:

“Contrary to what most people believe, nobody has ever *been* or *had* a self. But it is not just that the modern philosophy of mind and cognitive neuroscience together are about to shatter the myth of the self. It has now become clear that we will never solve the philosophical puzzle of consciousness – that is, how it can arise in the brain which is a purely physical object – if we don’t come to terms with this simple proposition: that to the best of our current knowledge there is no thing, no indivisible entity, that is *us*, neither in the brain

nor in some metaphysical realm beyond this world.” (Metzinger, 2009, p. 1; italicized in original).

To be sure, Metzinger acknowledges the experiential nature of the self; but he denies that this experience allows any inference about a real self; the self is just an experiential epiphenomenon. His account is problematic for different reasons. First: What would Metzinger accept as positive evidence of an existing – not just an epiphenomenal – self? If the answer is “nothing”, his approach is unscientific and non-falsifiable; if his answer is different from “nothing”, it would inevitably be in contradiction to his opening paragraph above because one would then have to investigate whether such evidence can be provided in at least some cases – while he has already explicated that “nobody has ever been or had a self”. Second and going back to this latter statement: it is stated that “nobody has ever been or had a self”; we wonder: how does he know? We argue that in superficial examination it may indeed appear that there is no self because this superficial sense of self is volatile; it needs a methodologically advanced form of enquiry to develop an understanding of a deeper level of it. Third: it is stated that “we will never solve the philosophical puzzle of consciousness”. We would agree to his statement when clarifying: “*using third-person methods* ‘we will never solve the philosophical puzzle of consciousness.’” (Metzinger) *But using a first-person method of enquiry we already hold the tools in our hands to address this puzzle.*” (italized words added by current authors). Finally, Metzinger implies that consciousness (and the self) arises from brain activity. But evidence from clinical studies suggests that it is difficult to identify a circumscribed neuronal instantiation of the self. Certain transient forms of amnesia such as Dissociative Fugue or the Psychogenic Amnesias, for instance, can go along with a reversible distortion or loss of one’s sense of self while not showing any substantial organic brain damage (e.g. Rathbone, Ellis, Baker, & Butler, 2015; Coons, 1999). Studies such as

these hence implicate a dissociation between the brain and the self and indicate how difficult it is to advance an understanding of the self as “aris[ing] in the brain” (Metzinger, 2009).

The self is understood as a cognitive construct

Devising theoretical models about the self and scrutinizing the cognitive components of selfhood is not a problem in itself. It becomes a problem, however, when a complex cognitive model is placed in the foreground of our understanding of a psychological phenomenon and theoretical constructs begin to replace the experiential reality of the self. This latter approach is evident, for instance, in an article by Skowronski (2012) who states: “Despite the fact that everyone knows what the self is, there are probably many different ways to construe the meaning of that term. Accordingly, it is probably a mistake to discuss the self, for there probably is no such singular animal. Instead, one needs to be mindful of the fact that there are likely to be many mental subsystems that each contain self-relevant knowledge” (p. 409). In speaking of “mental subsystems that each contain self-relevant knowledge”, Skowronski turns away from the experiential reality and instead focuses on hypothesized constructs that cannot be observed or studied directly; they can only be inferred and assumed – they carry *knowledge* about the self, no longer the self proper, according to Skowronski. These mental subsystems then become approachable with third-person observation (e.g., through questionnaires and interviews, or through behavioral observation) – but the core of the phenomenon is lost. The question about the one who holds and experiences this knowledge is left unanswered (see Klein, 2014).

Methodological Misconceptions

Once again we noticed two types of misconceptions in this category. The first is that the self cannot be directly experienced to begin with. The second is that the self can and should only be studied from a third-person approach.

It is denied that the self can be directly experienced

This account, going perhaps back as far as Kant, is based on the assertion that it is impossible to acquaint us directly with the self. The self is acknowledged as an existing phenomenon – but one that in reality we cannot know about. Such an apparent contradiction may appear difficult to envision – but it is evident, for instance, from the writings of Klein (2014) who distinguishes between “two selves: the neural self of science and the subjective self of first-person phenomenology” (p. 3) and says about the second one: “the self of first-person subjectivity [...] is the subject having the experience, rather than the object of that experience. This aspect of self cannot be directly known by acts of perception or introspection.” (ibid.) This latter assertion is in our view a contradiction. The very fact that Klein distinguishes between these two views on the self and that he in fact identifies one as the “subjective self of first-person phenomenology” means that he must be able to have a direct knowledge of it by way of introspection and (inward-directed) perception.

It is claimed that the self can only be studied using third-person methods

Several studies acknowledge the first-person nature of experiencing the I but then suggest a third-person approach to studying it. Such a third-person approach can only capture the behavioral correlates of the experience of the self, however; it does not speak to its experiential nature – to the so-called qualia aspect of the self. Furthermore, behavioral correlates of experiential qualities

always appear to be only particular aspects of an integrative whole which is not captured by the mere sum of its individual parts (see the Gestalt psychological approach).

In a recent article, for instance, White (2015) pursues such an approach and starts his outline by introducing the reader to the first-person nature of the self – and does so in the form of observations that are grounded in experience and are thus straightforward and non-controversial: “Most if not all humans have the experience of themselves as continuing to exist from moment to moment. There are two noteworthy aspects to that experience. One is of something that exists, but not just something but ‘I’: it is ‘I’ that exists, whatever ‘I’ might be. The other is that the existence of ‘I’ is not experienced as lacking extension in time. ‘I’ is experienced as continuing to exist over time.” (White, 2015, p. 99). These observations are subtle and noteworthy. It is only when White starts to look for a theoretical account of these observations that he leaves his earlier first-person perspective behind and changes over to a third-person perspective; and with this change in perspective he transitions from observations based on the reality of his experience to hypothetical assumptions based on theoretical speculations: “Given that there are processes in the brain that have the function of integrating or binding information about adjacent times, it can be hypothesised that the reflective experience of ‘I’ as continuously existing is constructed by such processes.” (White, 2015, p. 100). The speculative nature of his argument is already evident from the conditional framing of his sentence (“Given that there are...”) and draws on mainstream academic conventions that are beyond his (and our) capacity for empirical scrutiny: how would one test and document that the experience of the “I” would be constructed by brain processes? The typical answer is that we can document this, for instance, by means of brain lesions or brain stimulation studies, among others. But such evidence only documents the necessary, not the sufficient conditions for an anchoring of the self in the body (e.g. Majorek, 2012). White

acknowledges the first-person nature of the I but then incorrectly infers that this first-person nature should be studied from a third-person perspective.

In another example, Prebble, Addis & Tippet (2013) quite rightly point to the “methodological difficulty of devising rigorous scientific methods to investigate seemingly ephemeral, metaphysical notions like the ‘self’” (p. 815). They move on and discuss the challenges of studying the self using third-person behavioral methods. But they do not seem to pick up on the point that it is in fact impossible to study the qualitative first-person nature of the self with such a third-person approach, as is evident from the further development of their argument: “Some exciting methodological advances have begun to overcome these challenges. Neuroimaging methods have enabled researchers to measure brain activity while these subjective and previously inaccessible processes take place, allowing hypotheses to be formulated about the neural processes underlying sense of self and autobiographical memory” (p. 815). By the end of this quote, Prebble et al. have returned to the currently prevalent thinking style by endorsing third-person neuroimaging methods that they expect will generate new hypotheses. The authors appear to be oblivious to the fact that other approaches are needed that would not only allow for a study into the brain-related aspects – “the neuronal processes underlying sense of self”; but also for a study into the primary aspects – the sense of self proper.

In ending this section, we also wish to highlight that such other approaches are in fact available and already in use or have been used in the past: A prominent tool in studying the self are questionnaires or qualitative interviews; note, however, that typically the respective data are quantified or used to substantiate a hypothetical, non-experiential construct and only very few approaches are designed to allow an immanent access to the procedural dimensions of consciousness. Moreover, Wilhelm Wundt famously conducted introspective experiments early

on, but in his work, introspection was restricted to a rigid relation of the participants' attention to external stimuli. While Wundt's participants had to strongly attune their mind to the external experimental setting, a real insight into mental experiences would require a radical turn to the inner conditions and performance of mental activity, which actually did not happen in Wundt's research (e.g., Wundt, 1874). A more immediate introspective method was pursued by Husserl's phenomenology. Husserl also speaks of the possibility of enquiring into the inner world of a transcendental self, but his outlines are still abstract, there are no specific mental exercises that could be used to explore a content-based activity of the I (Husserl, 1968/2003). Taking yet another direction, Thompson and colleagues, in their Neurophenomenological approach, propose a method to link first-person to third-person data (Lutz & Thompson, 2003, Thompson, 2008); a number of other research groups are likewise exploring methods to studying first-person experience (e.g. Varela & Shear, 1999; Petitmengin, Remillieux, Cahour, & Carter-Thomas, 2013) but in all of them the researcher instructs the participants to scrutinize their inner world. These approaches are noteworthy and we wish to capitalize on them; but we also aim to advance this earlier work in that we seek to formulate a methodological framework that provides a basis for researching introspective experiences in our own – not in our participants'! – consciousness.

Traditionally, such first-person methods are met with uneasiness in many areas of psychology. What are these concerns about – and are they warranted?

Common concerns about first-person research

Within academic psychology, introspective approaches are typically considered to be unscientific. A long list of apprehensions about their flaws and limitations has been compiled – among them the concern that first-person methods are unreliable because participants often

confabulate inner experiences; the concern that we cannot think and observe our thinking at the same time, and that introspections are thus inevitably post-hoc and prone to bias; or the concern about their stand-alone character that makes findings impossible to replicate. But these and many other apprehensions have in turn been criticized, refuted, and found to be inaccurate or unwarranted on their own and we refer the reader to earlier reviews that outlines these issues in detail (Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2013; Weger & Wagemann, 2015a, b).

Given these refutations and the primary first-person quality of the self, how is it possible that academic psychologists are largely opposed to considering first-person experience, not even including it as a complementary method to a standard third-person approach? There are no intrinsic justifications for this rejection (Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2013; Weger & Wagemann, 2015a, b) and the one-sided skepticism towards first-person research is also by no means a rational or logical imperative (Danzinger, 1980; Kiene, 2001). What remains can be summarized – at least from our perspective – as three factors that strike us as being particularly important in accounting for this development. One is the existence of what Fleck (1935) has called a ‘thinking style’ with regard to this issue (see Kiene, 2001). A thinking style is a certain way of seeing or interpreting a particular matter; it is an agreed convention amongst a group of peers and colleagues who show a strong sense of cohesion and are isolated from outside streams of thinking. Ludwig Fleck calls such a community of mutually reinforcing minds a ‘thought collective’ (Fleck, 1935). Within a thought collective, conventions are perpetuated and develop a resistance to novel methods and insights. Such a thinking style, so we argue, is also widely evident in the psychological community regarding first-person research methods

In addition to the joint concepts of thinking style and thought collective we also see a second reason for the general skepticism about introspection. This reason lies in a certain delegation of

influence and authority that the experimenter inevitably has to come to terms with when moving on from third-person to first-person research. Within the scholarly community, the role of the third-person experimenter is rather powerful in that he controls the study-protocol, manipulates the variables and thereby distills information on the causes and effects of a psychological phenomenon. When this authority is surrendered and the competence of independent judgment is entrusted to the “uneducated subject”, the unidirectional stream of influence is weakened or even interrupted in favor of a more balanced and even collegial approach to the phenomenon in question.

A third reason for the general skepticism about introspection is a disregard or perhaps an uneasiness, even a fear (Böhme & Böhme, 1985) regarding what appears to be the irrational nature of the unconscious. The territory of the unconscious has been expelled more and more from our academic point of view in recent decades – and with a certain justification. Today, it has become a common mantram, especially in the experimental sciences, that this unconscious cannot be illuminated and it requires an unproportional effort to approach it in a matter-of-fact way (for noteworthy exceptions to the understanding of an “untouchable unconscious” see, for instance, research on executive influences over unconscious process (Kiefer, 2012; Kiefer, Adams, & Zovko, 2012; see also work on the directed forgetting paradigm, e.g., Kupper, Benoit, Dalgleish, & Anderson, 2014; or on introspective time estimation, e.g. Bryce & Bratzke, 2015). We are noticing in fact that it is no longer sufficient to have good arguments to approach the unconscious. An experiential first-hand approach is needed to go about it methodologically and to bring light into this darkness via a systematic inner schooling. This is why we are proposing and developing a first-person roadmap in the last section of the current account.

In light of these considerations we wish to question the dismissal of introspection and reiterate our strong plea to integrating a first-person approach into the study of psychological phenomena – especially regarding those phenomena that have a primarily first-person character. By no means do we seek to dismiss third-person research; third-person research has an undeniable legitimacy and the only way forward can be an integrative approach where first-person research complements third-person research; and vice versa. A number of recent studies have already integrated such a first-person approach successfully into experimental psychology, suggesting protocols on how to work with the *participants* of research studies to address this qualitative level (Barrett, Mesquita, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007; Marti, Sackur, Sigman, & Dehaene, 2010; Petitmengin et al., 2013); and also suggesting protocols on how to work on their own – i.e. the *experimenter's* – inner culture to bring new insights about qualitative dimensions of psychological phenomena to the surface (Weger & Wagemann, 2015a, b). Before introducing and discussing one such approach further, we wish to highlight why we actually consider it to be rather important to take these first-person qualities into consideration; and then build up to outlining the different stages on which such an inner research process can be taking place.

The importance of considering first-person aspects in studying the self

As will be evident from the discussion so far we consider it important to include an enquiry into first-person experiences into the study of the self. We have justified this approach cursorily throughout the manuscript but wish to acknowledge three further reasons for our persistent advocacy.

The first reason is that introspective enquiry allows us to uncover deeper layers of a phenomenon and a richness in content that is not accessible to third-person observation. In our

earlier introspective work, for instance, we enquired into the phenomenology of mindfulness (Wagemann & Weger, 2015). Guided by current theorizing according to which a mindful state is one of reflection and detachment, we were surprised to notice that when concentration is strong enough it can likewise yield an experience of entering the conceptual nature of the phenomenon, rather than detaching from it. This informed our understanding of what mindfulness is in a way that we would not have achieved with only third-person enquiries or behavioral studies.

On a more general level it is important to consider that our thinking is always an inevitable and inherent part of any research process and product. It is hence essential to illuminate and uncover the nature of this thinking process instead of pretending that our thinking can be left out of the equation and stands outside the research process.

The third reason pertains to the underlying implications about the self-other relationship that is promoted in an exclusive use of third-person or first-person research. A third-person perspective looks at a phenomenon from an external point of view. The inevitable implication then is that there is a distinction between the observer and the observed – a subdivision between a “Here I Am” and a “There You Are”. Such a view creates a gap between the observer and the observed – but it is a gap that in reality is an artificial one. There is certainly no denying that in our bodies we can live an existence as individual beings. But the boundary between the so-called inside and the outside is a permeable one and in reality a place of constant exchange (cf. Schad, 2014). On the experiential and conceptual levels, the absence of a principled gap between the observer and observed becomes even more evident. Consider, for example, the experience of awe and wonder or the state of being in dedication to a piece of art. In such situations it is as though we momentarily forget about our own point of view and immerse ourselves into the phenomenon or into the other person.

We are aware that such motivations for first-person research are also acknowledged by other scholars and that first-person research into the self has in fact a prominent record well beyond the psychological arena. But there it is often lacking a systematic methodological grounding – and hence gets lost in speculations and in fact often enough in denials of the self. Kant, for instance, postulates a transcendental self beyond space and time that has no individual aspect or relevance. Wittgenstein does not develop a concept of a thinking self either (“a thinking, imagining subject does not exist”; Wittgenstein, 1998, 5.631); and Hume, claiming in his sensualistic approach that sensations and perceptions are the basis of human action and reflection, argues that any self would have to originate from such sensations or perceptions; in his *Treatise*, he in turn explicitly denies the existence of the self. Likewise, the constructivist tradition assumes the self to be a constructed entity, not a reality.

In the following we wish to advance towards a systematic framework for researching the self in three stages and anchor our work in our earlier methodological account (Weger & Wagemann, 2015, a, b).

Different stages of enquiry in dealing with the self

On the most elementary stage, an enquiry into the first-person nature of self-experience starts out with the layman-style observations of everyday life. On this *first stage*, such observations are more or less incidental anecdotes about the self that we notice and that may be quickly forgotten. On a *second stage*, we begin to notice repetitions or peculiarities that may initially still recede quickly and easily out of awareness and memory. The sensitivity to the subtleties of selfhood is increased and the observations are more finely differentiated on this second level but there is still the risk that unexpected or peculiar observations are regularized – and that means: ignored,

streamlined, transformed or adjusted to a more familiar or currently active self-schema. Finally, on a *third stage* we use a systematic, research-led approach in studying and scrutinizing these introspective insights in an inner, meditative way.

Our approach may be interpreted as being similar to the psychoanalytic tradition which is also aimed at uncovering unconscious elements and raising them to consciousness. But there are two central differences. One is that the psychoanalytic approach requires another person (a therapist) who is more or less in command of the situation. This is a constellation which approximates the role of the experimenter in third-person experimentation more so than the current scenario in which the participant is not dependent on any (external) source of input other than her own thinking/experiencing. The second difference is that psychoanalysis deals with thoughts and feelings as *results* of earlier events. In the current approach, by contrast, we are more interested in *current or fairly recent mental processes*; these are not only more immediate and less static but also more accessible to mental enquiry and formal conceptualization compared to internalized (mis-)perceptions or traumas from a longer time ago.

In the following, we wish to illuminate and flesh out these three stages in more detail with regard to the self, beginning with the first level: our everyday introspective insights into the self. We will then explore these observations in more detail (stage 2) and in the next section outline our in-depth first-person research project on the inner qualities of the self (stage 3).

Stage 1: Everyday observations about the self

Beginning with an enquiry into the more ordinary, day-to-day characteristics of experiencing the self we noticed the following aspects that appear to us to be of central importance. They are aligned in part along the characterization of Förstl (2012, p. 171).

i) Aspect of self-reflexive consciousness: Often described as the ability to turn attention back at its own source (e.g. Baumeister, 1998), this aspect is perhaps the most immediately intuitive facet of the self and manifests as an experienced center of gravity from which activity relates to the world. The experience is that we cannot get hold of this source proper; rather, according to our preliminary observation, we infer it as it interacts with someone or something – or as Baumeister (1998) put it: “the self is caught in the act [...] of doing something else in interaction with the world.” (p. 681).

ii) Aspect of autonomy: As described earlier, as individuals we typically experience ourselves as being autonomous and largely independent from our environment, able to act or experience/receive according to our own momentary needs or wishes. We can be in disagreement with others, emancipate ourselves from our parents or teachers, and pursue our own goals even if nobody else can understand why. We can also passively allow ourselves to be driven by – or recede from – a course of events that we no longer endorse – all of this without other people in our environment appreciating or understanding it. Such and similar observations give us the everyday experience that in our selfhood we are autonomous from our environment.

iii) Aspect of spatial anchoring in the body: During normal wakefulness the body is typically experienced as the focus point of the self and we often use the concept of selfhood interchangeably with the concept of holding a body. The ‘world inside’ and the ‘world outside’, according to this view, are separated by the boundary of our body – the skin – and violations of this boundary are typically experienced as an immediate and dangerous threat to the self. Vogeley and Newen (2003) refer to this as ‘perspectivity’ in the sense that what we perceive, we perceive in reference to the axis of our body. But note that we can also accidentally or deliberately distance ourselves from the body (e.g. Out-of-Body-experiences after trauma; pain control; e.g., Scaer,

2014). Here, the spatial anchoring in the body is loosened and we either transition into a pathological state or already move beyond our common day-to-day consciousness – a state more characteristic of an in-depth mode of enquiry (see stage 2).

iv) Aspect of creatorship: We experience ourselves as the creators of our thoughts and actions. We do not typically observe exactly how a content enters our thinking – but we notice that such a content is emerging from inside us and hence assume that it has been brought about through our own thinking activity. We also have the experience of being the authors of our intentions. For instance, while we may be torpedoed by a host of external input, we still experience the freedom to deliberately orient our attention to one target over another at a given point in time. The aspect of creatorship is different from the aspect of autonomy – as autonomous beings, for instance, we can also passively receive from our environment rather than being authors or initiators of actions.

v) Aspect of temporal continuity and self-coherence: We experience the self as being continuous over time, a panoramic experience that often stretches throughout our entire biography. This experience is only temporarily interrupted by episodes of reduced consciousness such as sleep or anesthesia. But even such episodes do not incapacitate our general sense of coherence across time, the perception of an ongoing identity or standard of reference that stands firm amongst the more transient nature of the things that fly by. Note that to an observation on this first stage it is more of a background experience that is taken for granted but not yet deliberately reflected upon.

vi) Aspect of varying intensity: We typically have the experience that our self is stronger and more effective at some points in time compared to others. The self may, for instance, be somewhat fugitive when under stress, pain, or fatigue; it may, on the other hand, be perceived

to be particularly present in moments of productivity or joy. The presence of the self is particularly evident when we experience an ability to carry through with ‘something’ that is effortful. The successful exercising of effort (e.g. self-control) appears in fact to be a signature component of the experienced presence of the self.

The variability of the conditions in which the self is noticeable (aspect vi) may appear to be somewhat at odds with the aspect of temporal stability (aspect v). But we see no basic inconsistency: in most cases, following on from an experience of alienation due to stress or fatigue, we re-gather our sense of (self-) coherence like we do after a period of unconsciousness. There may thus be a temporal disruption in our sense of continuity – but we seem to recover from it as easily and as quickly as we appear to lose it momentarily.

Stage 2: Scrutinizing these observations more deliberately

On the second stage we scrutinized and pondered over these incidental observations further – now more carefully and systematically than on stage one but still without deliberate variations or a controlled inducing of an inner mindset as is characteristic on stage three. The observations in stage 2 are still a product of everyday analytic thinking and thus differ from the more concentrated or contemplative mindset of stage 3 in which we focused on a singular concept (e.g., a word or short phrase) and used a sustained form of focal attention as an anchorpoint to our enquiry into the experiential and conceptual dimension of the self. On the current second stage we made the following additional observations:

i) Aspect of self-reflexive consciousness: Occasionally, we make a new discovery about ourselves, and this discovery can be both positive (e.g., we managed to conquer a problematic trait) or negative (e.g., we find ourselves to be in conflict with how we would like to be). When

negative, it may result in an experience of alienation or even dissociation; when positive, it may result in an experience of deeper connection to our experienced core. In both cases, we witness a closer and more immediate insight into the self than we do during normal life. These moments of self-encounter can also be deepened and advanced when not focusing on aspects of the self proper but on activities that the self manifests in, e.g. the activity of our thinking. This then allows insights into qualities of the self less laden with positive or negative attributes to begin with, and will be our central research-topic in stage 3, see below.

ii) Aspect of autonomy: We have already outlined above how the experience of autonomy and isolation from our environment is the result of a one-sided and premature interpretation that disregards the insights stemming from a more thorough and systematic form of introspection. A consideration of an experiential and a conceptual dimension can, by contrast, expand this scope towards a more integrative picture, suggesting a continuous exchange in which the inside depends as much on the outside (the environment) as the outside depends on the inside; and that the mediation between both is performed by the I. We also notice that truly novel (often challenging and in fact painful) insight about the self comes mostly via reflections and mirroring from the outside (e.g., a person takes offence on our behavior and reflects this back to us). Likewise, we notice new and praiseworthy features in other people hardly when there is not a certain readiness to perceive them – and that means: when there is not already an instantiation of a similar praiseworthy feature within us, perhaps still dormant but without doubt already existing in potential, otherwise we would not be able to notice it. Once again, self and other, inside and outside are in constant dialogue – an aspect that is more strongly experienced through the systematic observation of this second stage compared to stage one.

iii) Aspect of spatial anchoring in the body: Moving from an exclusively behavioral

focus towards a consideration of the experiential and conceptual dimensions of the self we also realize that the spatial anchoring in the body is only one mode of expression of selfhood. During moments of intense interest or attention or when dedicated to a phenomenon in nature or to a piece of art, the perceived anchoring of the self in the body can loosen (as it also does during moments of intense pain; the loosening can thus be triggered by both an approach as well as an avoidance gesture). Likewise, when concentrating on a challenging mental task such as a thought experiment, a difficult calculation and the like, we are entirely immersed in the meaning or lawfulness of this task and effectively become one with it. Our self, in its conceptual reality, unfolds into the conceptual lawfulness of the phenomenon. When focusing on the non-material, conceptual nature of the self – and this, so we argue, goes more to the heart of the self than the behavioral aspects do – the spatial anchoring in the body loosens.

iv) Aspect of creatorship: During normal wakefulness we typically have the experience that thoughts continuously emerge in our mind and that we are the creators of these thoughts and actions. This sense of creatorship may sometimes be weaker (e.g., on a given day we have pondered over a challenging problem without success – only to wake up with a sudden and unexpected insight the next morning); at other times it may be stronger (e.g., when pondering over an ambiguous situation, weighting up the different aspects and finally coming to a judgment as to how to proceed); but by and large this implicit sense of authorship is central to our understanding of self-hood. We deliberately bypass free-will debates at this point (see Klemm, 2010, for an excellent review of the confounds pervading free-will debates; see Kane, 2005, for an overview over different approaches to the free-will-debate) and instead wish to point to another aspect – namely that only in deliberate attention do we realize that it is actually effortful to generate (and also to inhibit) thoughts. In fact, such effortful phases continuously alternate with non-effortful

ones, yielding what can be describe as the dual nature of thinking: a more productive vs. a more receptive gesture of thinking and of the corresponding authorship-experience. We can notice how at certain times we deliberately take command over our attention and seek out the information we need (the more productive mindset); and we also notice how at other times our attention is carried by situational factors (inner or outer) that shape the direction of our attention (the more receptive mindset). The experience of creatorship is thus to be differentiated according to a more engaging and a more receding gesture that becomes evident when looking more carefully at the inner reality of the phenomenon.

v) Aspect of temporal continuity and self-coherence: Temporal continuity and self coherence are evident from experiences such as personal identity and the forming of a coherent autobiography. It does not appear to be in conflict with the experience of transformation, inner development and personality growth – an experience that is likewise rather prominent, although at times perhaps only noticeable in retrospect as an earlier change or action may now come to fruition. The experience of continuity on the background of such changes is remarkable because it indicates already to the layman's observation that there is an axis of stability, an Archimedian point among the many more transient factors in our biography, including the coming and going of conscious awareness every time we enter into or emerge out of sleep. This temporal continuity must then stem from a source other than our everyday conscious thinking because this is regularly interrupted during sleep. Compared to stage one, on this second stage an awareness of this Archimedian point comes more into focus – it is no longer merely a background experience (as it is on stage one) but we deliberately reflect on it and even find a certain joy in becoming aware of it.

vi) Aspect of varying intensity: The sense of being more at one with oneself is

particularly evident in periods of special productivity or when we have the experience of moving forward with something that is important to us or that is at the core of what we want to achieve. The varying intensity of the experience of selfhood implies the question about conditions when the self is particularly present. Such conditions occur, for instance, when something is effortful; when we have to ground a scale of judgment in ourselves because no external reference is available, calling up an inner compass that is used to evaluate our environment, pondering whether something is appropriate or not, good or evil, too early or too late, etc; it also occurs when we engage in active recall (as opposed to recognition) i.e. when we have to generate an inner picture out of our own effort; when resisting the pressure of conformity; when exercising self-control; when accepting an inconvenient truth and realizing the need for action; among many other things. Under these conditions the self is experienced as more present – sometimes only in retrospect – it makes itself known as an independent scale of reference that brings forth a novel and unique insight and that stands out from the ongoing flow of events. Whereas on stage 1 we notice that the self is sometimes more and at other times less present, on stage 2 we become aware of, scrutinize and may even deliberately induce the specific activities or conditions when the self is particularly noticeable (vs. less noticeable).

A methodological approach to first-person enquiry into the self

On a third level we sought to explore whether we can move beyond the every-day observations of stages one and two and use a systematic introspective observation approach to advance towards the inner qualities and characteristics of the “I”. The aim was to make this experience accessible to deliberate enquiry within the very realm where it appears – the realm of first-person observation, thus avoiding the need to translate these experiences into the indirect/symbolic nature

of third-person observation. In our earlier work we have already started outlining a methodological approach to dealing with first-person enquiry in the case of perception-based mental images (Weger & Wagemann, 2015a, b; see also Meyer, 2015). As the self also (and in fact primarily) unfolds as an experiential and a conceptual entity, we here develop our approach further in an effort to allow for an enquiry into these more subtle, non-sensory facets. We conducted a series of five exercises and each of these consisted of four steps. The first and most elementary step was merely setting a theme for the trial. This theme constitutes the building blocks or content from which we subsequently started our enquiry and it can be either a concrete or an abstract/symbolic mental content. The second step consists of outlining a method for the trial; it varied slightly across themes but in all cases was ultimately aimed at uncovering facets of the inner nature of the self. The third step consists of identifying processes of consciousness that we encounter during the trial. Examples may be encounters with mental images or experiences, with instances of fatigue or distraction and the like. Finally, the fourth step consists of outlining the states of mental being or consciousness that we achieved as a result of the procedural movements we perform in step three. The procedural aspect (step 3) is akin to passing by landmarks on a journey, the fourth step, by contrast, is akin to entering into a respective landscape, experiencing the quality of a space and adapting into the respective inner (meditative) climate and then reporting on this experience.

During our collaborative enquiry we (i.e. all three authors) worked on altogether five themes over the course of one weekend. The themes were suggested by one of the authors (AM) as he had worked with them before and found them to be of special relevance to the topic at hand – the self. He briefly sketched relevant specifications of the method in advance and we spoke about it until we all were clear on necessary details, as outlined below. Each inner observation trial was then

conducted by each of us individually (with closed eyes to be able to better concentrate) while remaining in a group; it took about 10 to 15 minutes. We then shared our observations one by one, following steps 3 and 4. More specifically, we each reported what we noticed in turn, certainly yielding the possibility of mutual influence but also allowing for a sharpening and mirroring/distancing of individual observations. Finally, we scrutinized our insights regarding their relevance to our article. At the end of the weekend we sketched out a summary of our approach (steps 1-4) and of our experiences during each of the 5 exercises. Subsequently, the first author (UW) translated these notes into English, worked them out as prose text and sent them to the others for approval. Note that all three authors had practiced meditation over many years although this collaborative effort in a research-context was new. It is obvious from our description that our approach was not an established or externally validated protocol – at this early stage we would describe it more as a descriptive or associative phenomenology of first-person experiencing. But such phenomenology is nonetheless justified, especially early on in the research process –in what Hoyningen-Huene (1987) called the context of discovery where new observations are uncovered. In a subsequent stage (the context of justification; Hoyningen-Huene, 1987), a more rigorous methodological grounding is needed.

Exercise 1: For our first exercise we chose a theme that was sufficiently close to an everyday concrete and perception-based mode of experiencing: a triangle (step 1). The method (step 2) consisted of holding this triangle in our mental imagination in different orientations and directions (e.g. in front of us vs. behind us); and, finally, of desisting the concrete shape, keeping the triangle in consciousness only as a concept, i.e. a configuration of relations, without mental lines or dots. We conducted this exercise for about 10 – 15 minutes and then shared our findings. Step 3:

Initially, the image of the triangle was hardly noticeable, the lines were fuzzy, the endeavor was jeopardized by constant distractions; when a triangle could eventually be pictured, it only remained for a few moments and then was gone again. Bodily sensations were noticeable, other thoughts came by, outer perceptual distractions were prominently noticeable. As the trial advanced, however, it became easier to focus on the mental image of the triangle; to hold it momentarily; and to ultimately let it go and only maintain the relations. Step 4: Firstly, it was immediately apparent that the whole process was rather effortful – and this effort had to be newly instantiated every moment, it required a continuous stream of inner activity. At the same time, such continuing effort could occasionally result in an experience of sudden fluency, ease and lightness, it was an experience of entering the triangle – not in a physical way, of course, but in a conceptual way (i.e. by means of our thinking). When the perceptual qualities of the triangle were more and more disregarded during the final stage, the structural lawfulness of the triangle became evident without any grounding in such perceptual qualities and was nonetheless clear and transparent in nature, immediately accessible to our capacity of insight. The continuing exercising of effort at times also resulted in an experience of overstraining burden and mental contraction, producing a sense of fatigue. In reflecting on our findings with reference to the topic at hand, the self, it became quite evident that we were dealing with an inner activity that we produced (see above: aspect of creatorship) – mental images emerged in proportion to the effort we invested in our activity; they immediately collapsed when this effort receded. The emergence of the mental images may certainly depend on the activity of our brain (although we have little knowledge about that part of the story); but we surely did observe that such a picture, in many of its mental characteristics, depends on an inner activity. We were in a position to perform this activity and to observe what came about as a result of it. This producing and witnessing activity is what we

understood as a first symptom or layer of the I. We also noted that in rare moments we effectively entered into the object of our inner activity – once again in a conceptual/mental, not a physical sense. In these moments the distinction between the act of attention and the object of attention receded, our attention unfolded into the content and the boundary between subject and object was no longer of relevance – a further qualification of what we described as the aspect of autonomy on the earlier stages.

Exercise 2: As the theme (step 1) for our second exercise we chose the word “although” (German original: “obwohl”). We certainly use this word continuously in everyday communication but the question here was whether we could explore our inner activity more systematically while using it. In step 2 we set out on a specific method of dealing with it: We decided to look for samples of the word in the context of normal sentences to begin with. Following this, we aimed at looking out for what the “although” does across sentences, independent of specific instantiations. We next agreed to seek to distill a meaning of “although” and, next, to put it aside as a content, only focusing on its gesture as a mere quality or structural lawfulness. As before, we conducted this trial for about 15 minutes and then exchanged our findings. Step 3: Once again, the exercise was full of distractions but focusing on specific examples was straightforward. Quickly, a common gesture emerged – the simultaneous gesture of separation and unification that is immanent in the “although”. When reaching this point of gestures the sense of deliberately initiating a series of thoughts receded, the active pushing for thoughts only resulted in falling out of the process. Instead, it was as though a quintessential quality of the “although” disclosed itself, the normal manner of cognitive reasoning gave way to an experience of going along with an inner quality. This quality was one of opening up and entering a space of potentiality and freedom from causality (“although” supersedes causality). Also note that these experiences were interrupted by intervals of fatigue.

Resonating in between a state of sharp wakefulness and one of fatigue demarcated a border that was challenging in that one easily lost focus, got distracted or started to respond to distractions. The best strategy in these moments was to step back and focus again on specific instances or on the inner gesture of the “although”. Note, however, that the type of fatigue we experienced here could be distinguished from a generalized sleepiness as it also happened early in the morning when there was otherwise a sense of freshness and readiness for mental activity. Step 4: We started out with a level of holding examples in our mind but quickly moved on to experiencing a gesture of the “although” (both separating and uniting at the same time). Moving on, we dissolved these gestures into a structural, non-perceptual and non-linguistic mode of experiencing. The theme now only consisted of attentional activity, an attention that gave birth to a particular experiential vitality that was immanent within the “although”. We next reflected on the relevance of the exercise to our theme, the self. In between the simultaneous gesture of separation and unification, the activity of the one who stands amongst this polarity gradually became more and more apparent. It was a gradual process, at first the focus depended on the respective result, the gesture – and the awareness of the I remained in the background. But in redirecting our attention towards the source that brings forth the “although”, it entered a state of unformed being and here we began to notice the I as the producing entity (a further qualification of the aspect of creatorship, outlined above). The I as the observer and actor at the same time, the witnessing creator who oscillates between a state of producing (intention) and one of receiving (noting what the intention creates and what it gives back as a structural lawfulness). We were performing an activity but also experienced the immediate consequences of this activity in our consciousness. And yet, our individual consciousness did not recede but was transformed in the sense of unifying with the object of our attention. It remained awake and clear. In a follow-up to this exercise we contrasted the “although” with “nevertheless”

(German original: “trotzdem”). Here, a stronger goal-orientedness came about. The comparison of qualities allows for a sharpening of experiences that are related to the gestures of the different words.

Exercise 3: For our third exercise we chose the word “within” (German original: “im”) as our theme (step 1). Regarding the method (step 2) we set out on the following course: In the previous exercise we became familiar with the gesture of the word after an initial period of pondering over it intellectually. Now, by contrast, we decided to not focus on specific instances for too long and instead sought to move on to the experience of a gesture more quickly. Whereas conjunction words such as “although” establish a relation between a duality, the word “within” appears initially univalent, i.e., indicating a state of being rather than a relationship. We sought to focus on – and follow – the gesture of this inward movement. Step 3: As before, we were torpedoed by inner distractions and were pulled time and again out of the process. But there were also periods without distractions. In these, we initially felt that the “within” was a movement in successive steps that needed to be repeated over and over again. Moving on and continuing to maintain the effort, this successiveness and step-by-step character gradually became an inward stream, a continuity which had a lightness to it and yet was difficult to achieve and maintain. When the moment of continuity set in it was as though one was entering a stream of pure mental activity, triggering a sense of dedication and readiness. At the same time, as soon as the continuity set in there was once again the immediate challenge of fatigue, it was as though the witnessing of this continuity was so unusual and difficult to hold that it was overbearing initially and hence resulted in sleepiness. Establishing this continuity and ongoing wakefulness thus appears to call for a strengthening and education of the mental resources required for this conscious activity. Step 4: Following a brief period of intellectual pondering we quickly moved on to the gesture of “within”-

ness, a centripetal, purely conceptual (i.e. non-sensory) movement streaming inward from all directions. Next there was the transition from a discrete to a continuous activity, a moment at which the challenge of fatigue occurred. Also, the theme at this point changed somewhat, it became apparent that “within”-ness cannot be separated from “without”-ness, a complementarity emerged but in the sense of a bipartite one-ness that now revealed itself as an immediate experience. We once again reflected on the relevance of the exercise to the topic of our article, namely the self. In between the simultaneous experiencing of an inside and an outside was an awareness of a mediating entity, a witness of the experience. Even more, the complementarity of inside and outside was initiated/brought forward and witnessed at the same time. The original theme receded from consciousness and the simultaneous experience of producing and witnessing took its place, gaining more and more momentum as an experiential reality. Once again we experienced this as a symptom or layer of the I that manifested as a reality in these receiving and producing activities. This was a further qualification of the aspect of self-reflexive consciousness and of the aspect of creatorship, allowing insights beyond those that we obtained on stages 1 and 2.

Exercise 4: In our fourth exercise we took up a theme that we frequently encountered as an underlying motto in the mainstream literature (e.g., implied by Metzinger, 2009): “I am not” (German original: “Ich bin nicht”) – the only theme in our series of exercises that contained a negation (step 1). We were curious to enquire whether it is indeed possible to carry through with this negation and to extinguish the I from conscious experiencing. As for the method (step 2), we sought to assert this theme as an existential realization in our mind, word by word, aiming to extinguish our consciousness and its contents step by step. We wanted to be certain to not engage in an intellectual or philosophical speculation about the presence or absence of the I but to instead

enter into a phase of direct activity. Regarding the processes of consciousness (step 3) we noticed that extinguishing an experience of “I am” was not possible. When we tried to inhibit it, we initially noticed once more a state of simultaneous receptivity, activity and being. The more actively we tried to inhibit this state, the more vigorously the witnessing entity that brought it forward asserted itself. Step 4: After a brief stage of intellectually pondering over the theme we quickly moved towards realizing the “I am” as an inner reality to begin with, seeking to move beyond bodily sensations or philosophical considerations about the theme. We noticed that an experience of the “I am” was a necessary precondition for moving on to seeking to extinguish it in the “I am not”. Remarkably enough, however, the “I am” asserted itself all the more vigorously in proportion to our attempt at inhibiting it. Investigating the relevance of the theme for the current article we realized the contrastive power of this method which, in asserting one meaning or gesture, it actually called for – and brought up – its opposite. It triggered the realization that only an existing “I am” can bring forth the activity required for realizing its opposite, the “I am not”. This further qualified our earlier observations regarding the aspect of creatorship of stages 1 and 2, where we could only distinguish more generally between a more engaging and a more receiving aspect of self-experience. Our thinking did not dissolve in the process of this exercise; rather, it took on different forms – from holding pictures over moving in gestures to unfolding into a content-free state of activity that was radically aware of its own existential reality.

Exercise 5: In a fifth and final exercise we focused on the theme “beginning” (German original: “im Anfang” (step 1). Agreeing on a method (step 2) we sought to progress from a focus on cognitive content to a gesture and then on to a state of moving along within the theme in a conceptual, non-sensory way. We initially noticed a constant stream of inner activity towards a vanishing point but then noticed that we could also step out of this continuing causality (one

movement after the next) into an acausal state of beginning (step 3). The latter triggered an experience of freedom, resting outside causality and bringing forth the sense of standing at the origin of our own activity (step 4). It appears to us that one can practice to stand in and witness the origin of this stream and thereby realize that our state of personhood and humanness endows us with the potential of permanent beginning and novelty. Here we experienced an immediate connection to what we call the “I”.

Conclusions from the trial: Our normal waking consciousness yields an experience of the I that appears to be anchored in memories, habits, identifications with objects or traits and thereby relates to what can be called an individualized *form or mode of appearance*. But in addition to this more daily layer there also appears to be a layer that springs out of a concentrated type of attention and precedes these forms: an attention that is not yet condensed into a specific form and instead constitutes a readiness and potential towards any form (see especially exercises 3-5). This attention can be directed to the forms and modes of appearance and then immediately identifies once more with these objects, traits etc. It yields the results of a process of perception, is post-hoc and directed at the past. But in addition to unfolding into these forms or modes of appearance and adopting their nature and qualities, this attention can also be directed towards itself – although it is a rather unusual state occurring only during the rare moments of inner (meditative) enquiry. In these moments our attention remained in a state of readiness and pureness, continuously present in the here and now, not filled with the individualized forms and modes of expression of a respective content. This attention abandons images, memories and gradually even contents and gestures and reaches to a state of universal potentiality that gives birth to an experience of being both the source and the witness of this attention at the same time (in German: “der zeugende Zeuge”).

These moments are important and bear reference to the three aspects of psychological phenomena we have alluded to in the article-title: The first is the behavioral aspect, evident in the activity (=behavior) of our thinking – which now is a more inward form of activity, a concentrated type of attention which can take a more productive as well as a more receptive orientation. The second facet of these moments is an *experience* of a state of readiness and pureness – i.e. the qualitative side of this attention as it has been described above. The third facet becomes evident in an orientation of this attention towards that which is not yet individualized: the relation of our inner activity to the universality of the conceptual, a potentiality which is not “fleshed out” into a specific schema or self-image and instead emerges as a growing sense of coherence, unfolding out of our thinking awareness which is increasingly capable of holding this facet because it is being educated along the coordinates of the non-sensory form of attention that was practiced and described above (see also Weger & Wagemann, 2015b). It comes ever closer to what we call the deeper layers of the I and once again goes well beyond the experience of self-reflexive consciousness we described in stages 1 and 2. Achieving this state of self-referential attention is effortful, and it is equally effortful to maintain it. This open readiness, when not strengthened further through mental practice, either fills itself quickly with content (manifesting as distractions) or collapses into sleepiness. However, this strength can be cultivated like a muscle through the repeated practicing of such exercises and then yields a dimension of the I that goes beyond what an outside mode of third-person enquiry can uncover.

Summary

We started our enquiry by emphasizing the primary first-person nature of the self, challenging an approach that relies exclusively on third-person observation. We briefly pointed at the common reservations regarding first-person introspective enquiry and why these reservations are

unfounded, according to our view. Following this introduction we explored the deeper layers of insight into the self that are provided by such first-person observation, differentiating between the levels of experience and insight. Finally, in an effort to test and scrutinize this introspective methodology, we conducted such a first-person approach in three stages, starting out from ancillary observations, on to a more systematic scrutinizing of these observations, and arriving at a rigorous and in-depth first-person approach based on a methodological framework that we introduced prior to conducting a series of individual exercises.

We see the value of our approach both in the theoretical contribution to our understanding of the self; but also in a methodological roadmap that can be interpreted in the same sense as the methodological roadmaps in third-person/experimental research. The nature of findings from first-person research, including our own, are such that their quality cannot be fully appreciated when taken for granted at face-value; they can only be appreciated when understood in this roadmap-sense and then reinstated in one's own first-person experience. In that sense, however, they also stand in analogy to third-person research which likewise and inevitably needs to be taken at face-value unless replicated and reinstated in one's own laboratory.

A potential down-side of our first-person approach is the fact that it requires practice and training and may not be easily accessible to the lay person. But this is also the case with standard third-person experimentation: learning to devise an adequate study protocol may take more or less the course of a whole degree-program and it cannot be expected that a sound and thorough methodology is devised without any expertise. Many scholars today use spontaneous impromptu introspections – and these are in fact the more challenging obstacles to the research process, as they may confound the way subsequent experimental paradigms are set up (see Reisberg, Pearson, & Kosslyn, 2002, for an illustration of this problem).

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