



The Self-Referentiality of Reflective Thought

Abstract: This essay discusses the philosophical problem of self-reflective thought, the conditions of Mind reflecting itself, of consciousness observing its own actions and processes. The dilemma of Goedel's theorem regarding self-referential systems can be overcome by applying a transcendent thinking method. This higher thought (Paranoesis) provides complete knowledge of the system, but only if the individual mind (Exonoesis) is surpassed and merged with the universal mind (Hyponoesis) that allows reflective thought to be perfectly legitimate. To reach true objectivity of mind means leaving the subjective mind behind, and with it, the object-subject dualism so inveterate in our ordinary thought.

How is it possible that consciousness is able to observe consciousness itself? How is it possible to think reflectively at all? Can we take a stance outside of consciousness in order to observe it? Can we think about thinking per se? Can we observe thought processes, which are generally performed unconsciously? Is it possible to examine consciousness or mind with consciousness or mind itself?

These questions have often led to an exaggerated skepticism or to a negative criticism concerning the limitation of our knowledge about our mind. Some even say that because of the fact that we have no other means of investigating consciousness than consciousness itself, this can never lead to a complete understanding of consciousness. Advocates of this view come mostly from the scientific field. Science tries to objectify its subject matters, so that they can take a stance outside of the object and look at it. The means of investigation within experimental science are always means independent of the object, although this situation must be limited to the field of classical physics. In Quantum physics, however, experiments cannot be measured without the observer as a conscious living being. As a bottom line, it can be stated fairly generally, that we can have complete knowledge of an object only when we are independent and outside of it at the moment of observation.

The problem of completeness of knowledge is encountered as soon as you leave the rigid field of natural sciences. Any attempts to apply the completeness theorem to social sciences, such as psychology and sociology are doomed inevitably, because in those sciences, the object of investigation is identical with the investigator. A psychologist, for example, cannot investigate the psychical processes of another individual in the way a natural scientist investigates physical processes.

First of all, psychic events are not describable in terms of physical properties and therefore seem to be evasive. Second, we deal here with a much more complex structure than we ever meet in the physical world. This complexity entails a necessary incompleteness. The structure we deal here is not only more complex but also is what we call consciousness or mind. Here we have the identity of the object and its investigator, which was absent in natural sciences.

So, are we human beings ever able to know what consciousness and mind really are or are we left for ever in the dark and allowed only partial knowledge?

The answer to this question depends on our current understanding of what consciousness or mind is. If we reduce mind to a set of physical properties or equal it with emergent properties of the brain (materialistic and epiphenomenalistic view), we are held to believe, that it will one day be possible to know everything about consciousness ("promissory materialism"). More and more, however, scientists leave the terrain of a mere materialistic or reductionistic view of the mind and come to the conclusion, that mind is more than the sum of the brain's physical properties or more than a complex structure that emerged from the brain during the evolution of the human being. There are a lot of arguments against the reductionism of mind and I have discussed them in another essay.

If we tend to believe that consciousness and mind are more than physicalism will ever be able to describe, we are still left with the question whether we will ever be able to resolve this uncertainty of knowledge concerning the nature of our mind. The ordinary view of consciousness is, that it is local to every individual. If we take this as a fact, we will never be able to explain consciousness completely, because now we face Goedel's Theorem of the incompleteness of any self-referential system.

In a nutshell, Goedel's theorem states that for any formal system there are certain self-referencing assertions about the system that cannot be evaluated as either wholly true or false. They remain insoluble for our human reasoning. This paradox is originally attributed to the Cretan Epimenides who presented the statement "I am lying" as being undecidable concerning truth or falsity. If it is true, that I am lying, then the statement is false, and if it is false, that I am lying, then the statement is true.

This theorem sets a considerable limitation to our reasoning and thus to the ability of investigating our own consciousness or mind. It says, that we cannot make any generally accepted assertions about our mind since it is mind itself that asserts something about the mind. It can therefore not decide with certainty or finality whether any statements about our mind or consciousness are logically and factually true or false. This point is only eligible if we uphold the position, that in order to acquire a complete and consistent knowledge of something, we have to be outside of it, independent of it, at least formally. We can observe cells or atoms, they are part of our body, but we do not watch cells by means of cells, or atoms by means of atoms. In order to fully comprehend a system, we have to transcend it, by objectifying it. Only then is it open to analysis. In order to understand the physical world, we do not have to undertake strenuous efforts to transcend the system, because we as complex living organisms already are in a state of transcendence in relation to inanimate systems. The same applies to biological systems insofar as we as human beings furnished with the highly complex function of consciousness are again already in a higher state than a mere biological system, even such as our body.

That is not true when considering the next higher system after biology: consciousness and mind. Where is the next higher level, from which we can study the mental system as we studied the physical and biological system from the level of mind? Is there anything higher than mind? Can we enter a supra-consciousness in order to study normal consciousness?

If there is something like a higher consciousness or a supra-individual mind then Goedel's theorem is resolved, since then it will become possible to decide with certainty any self-referential assertions. What is more important, we are enabled, from this higher point of view, to have a complete knowledge of our ordinary consciousness or mind. This would be a revolution in modern science, such as was the Copernican Revolution or Relativity Theory or Quantum Physics. I would say, the greatest revolution of humankind hitherto. There would be an unlimited expansion of consciousness, of faculties of mind and with that of our knowledge of the world and ourselves.

This higher mind is what I called Hyponoesis or Universal Mind as distinguished from the Individual Mind or Exonoesis. As long as we stay within the bounds of the Individual Mind we are encapsulated within the frame of this limited system, limited insofar as it has personal acquired features and its knowledge depends on what this system has internalized during its development, what faculties have been nourished. So long as we are thinking as and in Exonoesis, all we can say about the Exonoesis is hypothetical and self-referentially insoluble. As soon as we attain a

higher position by transcending Exonoesis and thinking from the standpoint of the universal and encompassing mind, we can observe Exonoesis and investigate its properties and its nature. This was often done subconsciously by many great philosophers. They unawares had some glimpses of the true nature of the Individual Mind while being in the Universal Mind (Hyponoesis), into which they slipped involuntarily by the sheer act of speculative thought.

We can trace these mystical and higher insights into the nature of our mind throughout the whole history of our mental evolution. I deal with that in my historical account of the Individual and Universal Mind from the beginning of philosophy in ancient Greece up to our century. From many sources, not only philosophy, we can gather some information about this higher consciousness. We are still in the infancy of the homo sapiens evolution. Our evolution is far from completed. As we progress into the next centuries we will also develop more faculties of our brain and consciousness. These will eventually lead us to a complete understanding, not only of the world, but more essentially, of ourselves as noetic beings, as minds and consciousnesses.

We are still left with one last question: Is it possible for mind to think about itself? Is reflective Thought a non sequitur of our being entrapped in a finite system? I don't think so.

Ever and ever again have great thinkers and philosophers proven that self-reflective thought is something innate to human beings, although used rarely, since it does not serve any direct practical or evolutionary purposes. The fact is, we can reflect upon our thinking, and the results of this thought process cannot be dismissed as entirely false or invalid. The results are often quite as certain as empirical facts in the natural sciences. Regarding reflective thinking there are more uncertain and hypothetical and speculative assertions than anywhere else within the domain of thinking. Although these speculative thoughts may be even truer than mere practical thoughts (they often only appear to be true), our modern age is imbued with the supremacy of analytical reasoning and its practical implications.

The reason for the skepticism of speculative and self-reflective thought lies in the fact, that most of these self-reflective assertions are made from the standpoint of Exonoesis. It is the Individual Mind that reflects the Individual Mind. Here we are ineluctably faced with Goedel's theorem, that puts strong stipulations on any self-referential assertions. As long as we are within the framework of Exonoesis, we have no way of definitely proving our assertions. In order to do that, we must leave the system, because only then do we have the complete and full understanding of the system and all its functions. Only then can we survey the system and its interactions so as to postulate our observation in clear and distinct statements, verifiable or falsifiable by anyone who is able to gain the same viewpoint above the Individual Mind (Exonoesis).

To make generally acceptable and objective statements about Exonoesis, a certain process of Deindividuation is necessary. We have to objectify (in a philosophical sense) Exonoesis in order to have a clear and distinct concept of it. This dialectical movement of the concept was implicitly foreseen in Hegel's notion of Absolute Knowing. The insufficiency of Exonoesis leads necessarily to the next stage on a higher level, Hyponoesis, or Hegel's Spirit. In Hegel's account of the movement of consciousness, he stated clearly, that we have not yet reached the last level, Absolute Knowing. We are still on our way to that final goal of all dialectical movement. It is the self-fulfillment of the Spirit, the reunion of the Universal Mind with the Individual Mind.

I am a little hesitant to say that we have to "leave" our Individual Mind (Exonoesis) or that we have to be "outside" of it. These terms must not be taken literally, otherwise we commit the object-subject fallacy. Also, when I speak of making Exonoesis an "object" of our investigation, I do not mean the object as opposed to a subject (cf. object-subject dualism). It is not an ontological object but a conceptual one. The Universal Mind (Hyponoesis) encompasses everything, from the physical world to Exonoesis itself. So we can never step out of a system literally. We always are in Hyponoesis, but not consciously, that is without actualizing the potential state. Potentially we are Hyponoesis, but actually we have not yet developed the full state of Hyponoesis. We are in a continuous movement towards the fulfillment of Hyponoesis.

That is the self-realization and the self-knowledge of Hyponoesis as a process within the Hyponoesis itself.

This process is antagonized between being and thought, between object and subject. Here we are dealing with ontological categories. What I mean by object is the conceptual object we encounter in thinking reflectively. By "leaving" the system I mean transcending the Individual Mind (Exonoesis) by assimilating Exonoesis to Hyponoesis, that is, by expanding its temporally conditioned boundaries into the infinity of Hyponoesis (this extension of Exonoesis's capacity is also called Paranoesis). As we extend our horizon, we can look back at the previous horizon, left back, and we get to know its restraints, its features and peculiarities. We are steadily on the move, towards new frontiers, until we finally have reached the infinity, the boundless, the eternal. The horizon of the Individual Mind is a temporal structure, actually time itself. Time holds us encaptured within its boundaries. By transcending Exonoesis (Paranoetic Thinking), we also transcend time. Time is a necessary structure, without which the world and living beings as we know them, would be impossible. Time is an inherent feature of consciousness and not some property of the physical world. Scientific time is not subjective. Since it is a property of consciousness, it is a definite feature of all human beings and does not depend on the subjectivity of consciousness.

We have both subjective and objective properties in our mind and consciousness. The objectivity of the mind is its primary and general overall structure, the framework that is common to all reasoning beings. The subjectivity of mind is the individually acquired and developed features and idiosyncrasies of every human being. It is also the uniqueness of human experience. The subjective mind is private to its user. Nobody can experience my pain. The objective properties of the mind are generally available, but not through experience, since experience is unique, but through the Universal Mind (Hyponoesis), which encompasses all Individual Minds. This part is yet almost wholly unexplored. My philosophy of a metaphysics of thought endeavors to set up a frame of reference for future investigations of Hyponoesis. It is only a starting point from which greater minds than I am have to lead new investigations and bring about the intellectual revolution that is long overdue in our decadent modern world.

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URL: <http://www.hyponoesis.org/>

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