Pre-reflective self-consciousness: Exploring the Intersection of Phenomenology and Cognitive Sciences

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If I am asked to describe the sensation of an itch that I am feeling on my hand, I will answer by reflecting on it. Adopting this reflective stance enables me to create a distance between myself and the sensation of itchiness, thereby making it an object of conscious awareness. Since its inception, phenomenology has emphasized a pre-reflective dimension of self-consciousness that is fundamental to the capacity to reflect on one's own experience (Husserl 1959; Sartre 1956; Ingarden 1992; Merleau-Ponty 2012). Recently, a cross-disciplinary discussion has emerged surrounding the topic of pre-reflective self-consciousness, which is located at the intersection of continental and analytic phenomenology (Miguens, Preyer & Morando 2015; Schlicht 2018; Gärtner 2023) and cognitive science, where predictive-processing frameworks have been applied to perception, bodily selfhood, and affective/interoceptive experience (Hohwy 2013; Seth 2013; Limanowski & Blankenburg 2013). The impetus for this debate stems from the growing reliance on the concept of pre-reflective self-consciousness in various fields of applied research and innovation, including psychiatry and psychopathology (Cermolacce, Naudin & Parnas 2007; Neustadter, Fotopoulou, Steinfeld & Fineberg 2021), developmental psychology, and robotics (Ciaunica & Crucianelli 2019; Forch & Hamker 2021; Esaki et al. 2024; Yoshida, Masumori & Ikegami 2025).

One of the most challenging aspects of pre-reflective self-consciousness concerns its first-personal status. Non-egological theories, primarily associated with the Heidelberg school, suggest that pre-reflective self-awareness is "anonymous." This means that it encompasses awareness of experience but not of a subject that lives it (Frank 2022). In contrast, proponents of egological accounts, such as Dan Zahavi, argue that lived experiences are not structured in an anonymous field but are always given to someone (Zahavi 1999, 2005, 2014). They exhibit a distinctive first-personal character commonly referred to as "for-me-ness" (Zahavi & Kriegel 2015), "minimal" or "core" self (Gallagher 2000, 2023). The recent prominence of predictive-processing frameworks has brought this tension into sharper focus. As several authors have noted, predictive approaches generally describe first-person phenomena in terms of internal representational or inferential states, shifting the emphasis from the personal to the sub-personal level (Schlicht 2018; Colombo & Fabry 2020). In their more recent embodied and embedded formulations (see Venter 2021), predictive models tend to characterize self-consciousness primarily in functional and regulatory terms, as grounded in processes of self-organization, adaptive control, and the maintenance of organismic viability.

In this special issue, we aim to explore the foundations of pre-reflective self-consciousness beyond the compartmentalization, fragmentation, and insulation that currently separate phenomenological and cognitive-scientific approaches. Our objective is to foster intersections that reconfigure the landscape of the debate and open new avenues for understanding this fundamental dimension of consciousness.

Questions to be addressed include, but are not limited to, the following:

- What is the impact of current predictive models on the distinction between anonymity in the pre-reflective domain and for-me-ness? Conversely, can a specific understanding of pre-reflective self-consciousness influence the design and application of predictive models?
- Once pre-reflective self-consciousness becomes an object of scientific modeling, what remains of its pre-reflective character?
- What role does the lived body play in this context? Could pre-reflective self-consciousness be considered as a result of development and the sociocultural context? Alternatively, does it provide a stable background against which complex identities, such as the narrative and normative ones, unfold?
- Do the conditions of embodiment, embeddedness, and historicity introduce an irreducible passivity in the structure of pre-reflective self-consciousness? Is it equally vulnerable to the paradoxes of the reflective consciousness, which manifests as both subject and object, spontaneity and pre-given factuality?

We particularly welcome contributions that propose novel theoretical, conceptual, and methodological connections or that challenge existing assumptions, whether through phenomenological analysis, computational modeling, case studies, or historiographical and interdisciplinary critique.

Manuscripts should be submitted by Tuesday, June 30, 2026. All submissions must be prepared for blind peer review and should not exceed 50,000 characters, including spaces.

Submissions must be made through the journal's online submission system.

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