

The Interdependence of Self and Other: A Thomistic Solution to the Problem of Intersubjectivity
Dissertation Summary

Much recent work in the philosophy of mind has focused on our ability to achieve mutual awareness with other persons. This phenomenon can occur in joint attention, when we play music together, dance, play sports, or in any number of social activities. Such mutual awareness involves not only awareness of one's own mental states, but also awareness of the mental states of the other, and awareness that each person is aware of this mutual awareness. Moreover, mutual awareness seems to involve sharing one's own mental experiences with others.

There have been numerous attempts to better understand the nature of our shared awareness, but a central difficulty in explaining this phenomenon concerns our conception of first-person mental states. We often presuppose that we have better awareness of our own mental states than we do of the mental states of others, and we tend to think that our first-person experiences can be achieved independently of other persons. Hence many seek to explain mutual awareness in terms of individual cognitive mechanisms: we simply coordinate our self-sufficient first-person mental states in the right way with those of others, and we thereby become mutually aware. Yet much contemporary work in the cognitive and social sciences indicates that our mental states are not self-sufficient in this way, and I suggest that we need a philosophical explanation of mutual awareness that highlights the interdependence of our first-person experiences with those of other persons. In other words, on my view, we cannot explain mutual awareness in terms of individual cognitive mechanisms, but must recognize irreducibly social cognitive capacities – capacities that are only fully actualized when we interact with other persons.

My dissertation divides into two parts. In the first part (chapters 1 and 2) I focus on the nature of mutual awareness and shared experiences, highlighting what I take to be difficulties for providing a satisfactory explanation of this social phenomenon. I develop an account of the desiderata for an adequate theory of mutual awareness, and then critically examine several leading accounts. On my view, a satisfactory theory of mutual awareness must explain i) how shared mental states and mutual awareness is possible, ii) the nature of the relations formed between persons in social interactions, and iii) must successfully differentiate the capacities that underlie these relations from other cognitive capacities. However, among other problems, many of the prominent contemporary theories fail to account for all of these essential components. I show this by exploring, in some detail, the theories developed by Christopher Peacocke, Richard Moran, and Dan Zahavi.

In the second part of my dissertation (chapters 3 and 4) I present what I take to be the most promising framework for developing an adequate theory of mutual awareness – a model found in the Aristotelian philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. I highlight texts in which Aquinas claims that we achieve awareness of other persons that is similar in kind to our awareness of our own minds, offering a reconstruction of his philosophy of mind to show how these texts fit within his general ontology and theory of human cognition. I then utilize this framework to claim that intersubjective relations form as a result of the activation of ontologically interdependent powers. Unlike other relations, social relations involve a reciprocal interplay of powers that are both active and passive. These unique powers are only found in persons, and can only be fully actualized in these social interactions. These powers are thus bidirectional. Furthermore, social relations form as a result of these bidirectional powers, and each person is both active and affected when standing in such a relation. Hence, unlike other relations, these social relations are dynamic. Finally, this framework also reveals that we only fully actualize our natures when we interact with others socially, which indicates that these relations are perfective.

On the framework I propose, to fully realize one's nature as a human person is to be in relation with others, and thus to be ontologically interdependent with other persons. This approach to intersubjectivity ultimately shows that social interactions do not involve syncing up self-sufficient mental states, but require ontologically interdependent social powers. This in turn reveals that mutual awareness is not a result of coordinating first-person perspectives, but instead naturally arises from certain forms of social interaction. The account I develop thus paves the way towards a better explanation of shared mental states and mutual awareness.