

# Self-knowledge: introduction to the topic

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## 1 Categories of self-knowledge

When people talk about self-knowledge, they usually really mean something like ‘knowledge of one’s own mental states.’ What are the kinds of mental states they have in mind?

1. Pains, itches, and other bodily sensations.
2. Visual, auditory, and other sensory perceptions.
3. ‘Non-phenomenal’ mental states like beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on.
4. Moods and emotions — fear, depression, guilt, elation.

Sometimes in the category of ‘self-knowledge’ people include two other kinds of knowledge, which are not obviously cases of knowledge of a mental state:

5. Proprioceptive knowledge — knowledge of the location of your limbs; e.g., knowledge of whether your hand is open or closed.
6. Knowledge of what intentional actions one is trying to perform.

## 2 The character of self-knowledge

That’s a quick list of the kinds of things that self-knowledge is knowledge of. But what is supposed to be special about knowledge of these kinds of things?

Different philosophers have claimed different things about self-knowledge; some have doubted whether there is anything special about the character of self-knowledge at all. The following are some of the claims that have been advanced:

*Incorrigibility:* if one believes that one is in a given mental state, then that belief is true.

*Transparency:* if one is in a given mental state, then one knows that one is in it.

*Immediacy:* a belief about one's own mental states need not rest on independent evidence to count as knowledge.

*Authority:* one is regarded as knowing one's own mental states best.

*Method:* one's beliefs about one's own mental states are formed on the basis of a special introspective method of accessing those states, which is not used in forming any other kind of belief.

These claims are not exclusive alternatives; all of them might be true, or some of them, or none of them.

Further, these should be thought of as starting points; even if these are false, qualified versions of them might be true. For example, Transparency seems false for beliefs. But perhaps it is true that if one has a belief, then one is *in a position to know* that one has it.

These theses might also be true about some mental states, and false for others. For example, Transparency might be true for pains but false for beliefs.

### 3 Why the topic is important

1. As a branch of epistemology. Epistemology is, among other things, the study of what we can know and how we can know it. If our knowledge of a certain class of facts seems different than other sorts of knowledge, then it deserves special investigation.

2. Because of its importance for the philosophy of mind. Many have thought that the fact that mental states can be known about in a certain special way says something not only about our knowledge, but about the mental states known. (Example: self-knowledge on the part of non-linguistic creatures, and the role played by language in constituting mental states.) And the nature of such mental states is at the center of the philosophy of mind.

3. Because it seems to conflict with an important thesis in the philosophy of mind, which is often called *externalism*.