

## 1 Experience

I want to consider the claim that the subject cannot in the present moment of awareness take itself as it is in the present moment of awareness as the object of its awareness. In the first two sections I'll set out some assumptions.

First, I'll assume that materialism is true. By 'materialism', though, I mean real or realistic materialism, i.e. materialism that is wholly realist about the *experiential-qualitative character* or *what-it's-likeness* of our conscious mental goings on—I'll call this 'experience'—



as the whole human being, or a persisting brain structure.

This is not to say that reality contains anything that actually makes the grade as a thing or object or substance. The Buddhist doctrine of 'dependent origination' suggests that nothing does. An alternative view is that only one thing does—the universe. On this view, Parmenides and a number of leading present-day cosmologists are right. There's really only one A-Grade thing or object or substance—the universe. (Nietzsche and Spinoza agree that nothing smaller will do.)

That's one important view. The present claim is neutral on this issue. It's simply the claim that thin subjects are as good, as candidates for thinghood, as anything else. In fact I think they're better candidates than a persisting brain structure, or any ordinary physical object, and indeed any supposed fundamental particle.<sup>4</sup> I'm stressing the point to counter the thought that thin subjects are somehow not real things, ontologically worse off than persisting brain-structures, for example. This view isn't sustainable, I think, when metaphysics gets serious and stops spending its time trying to square ordinary language and ordinary thought categories with reality.

Having said that, I should add that most of the claims I'm going to make will apply to the persisting

unimportant point against (i) is that subjects that persist for appreciable periods of time can have themselves as object of awareness, in the fullest sense, when they remember themselves experiencing something yesterday, or a moment ago. Against that, it may be said that it's part of the meaning of the word 'aware', used as it is here to denote a state of conscious experience, that 'awareness of  $x$ ' can refer only to apprehension of  $x$  as it is in the present moment, modulo whatever time lapse is integral to the mode of awareness in question (visual, auditory, inner self-awareness).

However this may be, I'm going to concentrate on (ii), the case of present-moment awareness, and argue that there are two distinct ways in which

[1] the subject of awareness can be aware of itself as it is in the present moment of awareness.<sup>5</sup>

First, less controversially, and in line with Phenomenological orthodoxy, I'll argue that the subject can be present-moment aware of itself in a *non-thetic* way, where to be aware of something  $x$  in a non-thetic way is to be aware of  $x$  although one isn't specifically attending to  $x$ . Secondly, less familiarly, I'll argue that subjects of experience can also (if exceptionally) be present-moment-aware of themselves in a *thetic* or attentive way.<sup>6</sup> I take this second claim to be a more direct

Taking 'SA' to be short for 'present-moment self-awareness', we can call [2] the Universal SA thesis, *USA* for short, and we can call [1] the possible SA thesis, *PSA* for short.

According to [2], it isn't possible for a subject to be aware of anything without being present-moment-aware of itself. This is true of every subject of awareness, however lowly. If sea snails have any sort of awareness, then they're (necessarily) aware of themselves in the present moment of awareness. I take [2] to be endorsed by many in the Phenomenological tradition. Husserl, for example, writes that 'to be a subject is to be in the mode of being aware of oneself'.<sup>8</sup>

i.e.

[5] all awareness involves awareness of itself,

[5] is in fact the only defensible version of [4]—as Aristotle pointed out—given the threat of an infinite regress of awarenesses of awarenesses that [4] poses as it stands.<sup>11</sup> I'll call [5] the AOI thesis, 'AOI' for 'awareness of itself', *AOI* for short.

The claim is, then, that AOI plus the two principles [P1] and [P2] entails USA. More briefly: AOI and [3] entail USA. The argument isn't formally valid as it stands, but the idea is clear.

It may be allowed that [5] all awareness involves awareness of itself, but doubted that

[6] all awareness is or involves *present-moment* awareness of itself

on the grounds that there is always a time-lag, or an episode of what Ryle calls "swift retrospective heed" (1949: 153). But it seems that this is not possible, if [5] is true at all, because the last moment in any episode of awareness couldn't in this case involve awareness of itself (all streams of awareness would have to last for ever).

subject, of that very awareness

awareness) isn't ontically distinct from the awareness of which it is the subject

or in other words

[16] the subject of awareness is identical with its awareness.



instance of it involves both a primary awareness and another instance of consciousness which is somehow distinct and separable from the first and which has the first as its object. That would threaten an intolerably infinite proliferation of instances of consciousness. Rather, the self-consciousness in question is a sort of *immanent reflexivity* by virtue of which every instance of

This is a question for another time. My present aim is simply to lay out the way in which the non-thetic version of PSA, i.e.

[1] the subject can be aware of itself as it is in the present moment of awareness

taken in its strong universal form, i.e. as USA that

[2] the subject is always aware of itself as it is in the present moment of awareness

is seen to follow from a substantive thesis, the AOI thesis, which I've put through a series of formulations, beginning with

[4] all awareness involves awareness of awareness,

passing through

[11] all awareness on the part of any subject at any moment, comports awareness, at that moment, on the part of that same subject, of that very awareness at that very moment,

and ending with

[13] all awareness comports awareness of itself.

The move made here, from the claim that the subject is necessarily aware of its awareness to the claim that it is necessarily aware of itself, is guaranteed given [P1] and [P2] (*sc.* [3]). AOI itself may still need defence, and even when its truth is granted questions about its fundamental metaphysics will remain. But these are matters for another occasion.

## **6 Non-thetic present-moment self-awareness**

Does the plausibility of USA depend essentially on AOI? I'm not sure, and I'm now going to consider some other ways of expressing non-thetic present-moment awareness of self. According to Louis Sass

the most fundamental sense of selfhood involves the experience of self not as an object of awareness but, in some crucial respects, as an unseen point of origin for action, experience, and thought.... What William James called . . . the 'central nucleus of the Self' is not, in fact, experienced as an entity in the focus of our awareness, but, rather, as a kind of medium of awareness, source of activity, or general directedness towards the world (1998: 562)

Bernard Lonergan remarks that

objects are present by being attended to, but subjects are present [to themselves] as subjects, not by being attended to, but by attending. As the parade of objects marches by, spectators do not have to slip into the parade to be present to themselves (1967: 226).

In Samuel Alexander's words:

in knowing the object I knowwwwwwww



isn't in the focus of attention, or rather, more simply, in attention.<sup>23</sup> We can also call it background awareness, perhaps, for background awareness isn't 'implicit' awareness either, any more than dim or peripheral awareness is.

Another way to put the point, perhaps, is to say that all occurrent awareness is *ipso facto* and *eo ipso* explicit awareness just in being, indeed, awareness, occurrent awareness, genuinely given in awareness, part of the actual content of experience that is experienced by the subject. This is, admittedly, a non-standard use of 'explicit', inasmuch as it allows that explicit awareness can be very dim, but one can use the word 'express' to do most of the work usually done by 'explicit', and the basic distinction is in any case clear: it's the undeniably real if soft-bordered distinction between express, foreground, attentive, thetic awareness, on the one hand, and more or less dim, peripheral, non-attentive, background, non-thetic awareness on the other.<sup>24</sup>

The distinction can be refined. There's a sense in which self-awareness of the sort described by Sass, Lonergan and Deikman can be said to be *in the foreground* even though it isn't *thetic*. Such self-awareness is or can be a centrally structuring part of experience, in such a way that it's rightly classified as a foreground aspect of experience, even though there's also a respect in which it normally passes unnoticed, being entirely non-thetic. In the penultimate paragraph I suggested that we can equate 'non-thetic' with 'background', but I'm now inclined to overrule this by introducing a wider notion of foreground and claiming that

experiential elements may be constitutive of the nature of the foreground while not being thetic.

At this point we have five distinct expressions, and the terminology is threatening to go out of control. But the idea should be discernible to a sympathetic eye. On the present terms [i] all awareness is indeed *explicit* in the weak sense, since this now simply means is that it is genuine awareness, genuinely given in awareness. [ii] Some explicit awareness is *background*, and not at all thetic or express. [iii] Some explicit awareness is *foreground*, but still not *thetic* or *express*. [iv] Some foreground awareness is in addition thetic or express.

These matters need careful treatment (a careful terminology), and I won't say much more here, except to note a parallel with the case of the qualitative character of the sensation of blue when one looks at the sky. There's a clear respect in which the qualitative character of one's sensation of blue is in the foreground of experience—it floods one's experience—as one looks at the blue sky. But it is at the same time wholly 'diaphanous', in the sense that one sees 'through' it, as it were, in seeing the blue sky, and is to that extent wholly non-thetic: not in the (cognitive) focus of attention in any way, considered specifically as a sensation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> 'In attention' is often better than 'in the focus of attention', because the notion of focus seems to contain the foreground/background distinction and to exclude the possibility that there may be nothing more to one's experience, when one is attending, than what is in attention.

<sup>24</sup> One can even talk of unconscious occurrent awareness when considering things like blindsight; see, e.g.,

This being so, I'm now tempted to split 'express' from 'thetic', just as I previously split 'foreground' from 'thetic', and to say that the awareness of the sensation of blue is express but not thetic. I'll return to this idea on p. 000 below; I think these distinctions capture real differences although they need careful further work. Experience is an extraordinarily complex part of reality, and this is one dimension of its complexity.

## **7 Thetic present-moment self-awareness**

The form of present-moment self-awareness described by Sass and others is plainly non-thetic. This means that it isn't in conflict with the ancient eye objection, if the eye objection can be expressed as the claim that the subject of experience can't take itself as it is in the present moment of experience as the thetic object of its attention. As already remarked, I think that present-moment (no time lag) self-awareness can also be thetic, so that the eye objection is false even in that formulation, and I will now try to say why.

—This is hopelessly vague. Plus you haven't answered the 'systematic elusiveness' objection. You may think *I'm now thinking a puzzling thought*, or *I'm looking down on India*, or just *Here I am*, in an attempt to apprehend yourself as mental self or subject or thinker in the present moment, but in entertaining these contents you necessarily fail to apprehend the thing that is doing the apprehending—the entertainer of the content, the thinker of the thought, i.e. yourself considered as the mental subject at that moment. Ryle is right. Any mental performance "can be the concern of a higher-order performance"—one can think about any thought that one has—but it "cannot be the concern of itself" (1949: 188-9). When one thinks an I-thought, this performance "is not dealt with in the operation which it itself is. Even if the person is, for special speculative purposes, momentarily concentrating on the Problem of the Self, he has failed and knows that he has failed to

doesn't involve any such discursively articulated representations, although it does require being in some sort of meditative condition. Then it's simply a matter of coming to awareness of oneself as a mental presence (or perhaps simply as: mental presence) in a certain sort of alert but essentially unpointed, global way. The case is not like the eye that can't see itself, or the fingertip that can't touch itself. These old images are weak. A mind is rather more than an eye or a finger. If Ryle had perhaps spent a little more time on disciplined, unprejudiced mental self-examination, or had tried meditation, even if only briefly, and in an entirely amateur and unsupervised, Senior Common Room sort of way, he might have found that it's really not very difficult—although it's certainly not easy—for

moment of awareness

which earns the laborious title

[17] the Possible Thetic Present-Moment Self-awareness thesis

—the Thetic PSA thesis, for short. It claims that thetic SA (present-moment self

(the Express PSA thesis, for short) if the word ‘thetic’ is judged to be irretrievably out of bounds. In the rest of this paper, though, I’m going to continue to defend the Thetic PSA thesis: I’m going to take the word ‘thetic’ to be principally tied simply to the idea of attention, attentiveness, full attention, and attempt to cultivate a sense of how attention (and cognition) can have forms that don’t involve anything like discursively structured operations of positing or positioning things as objects of attention.

## **9 Defence of thetic present-moment self-awareness**

The fundamental objection to the Thetic PSA thesis, perhaps, is that thetic awareness is necessarily a *mediated* form of awareness, where this means not only that there is necessarily a time lag, but also that one inevitably has to do with a *representation* of the phenomenon one is aware of which is not the phenomenon itself. Here we come up against some very general questions about knowledge, and I’ll limit myself to a few remarks.

‘Cognitive’ means ‘of or pertaining to ... knowing’. It follows immediately that the standard distinction between cognition and emotion is illegitimate, because our emotions,



here.<sup>29</sup> There is, furthermore, a fundamental sense in which *all* experience as currently defined, i.e. all what-it's-likeness, is a matter of direct acquaintance, be it sense/feeling or cognitive. So far, then, there's no reason to think that the idea of cognitive-experiential direct acquaintance is any more problematic than the idea of sense/feeling direct acquaintance. Some philosophers may find the idea of direct acquaintance with cognitive what-it's-likeness alarming, but it's backed by a point parallel to the point about knowledge made on p. 000: if there is any kind of cognitive experience at all, this kind of direct acquaintance must exist as a condition of its possibility.<sup>30</sup>

Second: I agree that the direct present-moment acquaintance involved in sense/feeling experience is standardly non-thetic. Sense/feeling experience is a huge part of our overall experience, e.g., when we perceive things, but we very rarely focus on it.<sup>31</sup> So it's unclear how we can work a passage from the understanding of direct acquaintance given to us by non-thetic sense/feeling cases to Thetic SA, a subject's direct thetic present-moment



argument (without committing myself to the view that either can occur wholly without the other).

These are difficult issues, about which I feel unsure. I do, however, feel sure about the Thetic PSA thesis, the possibility of having direct thetic (in the wider sense) awareness of oneself as subject in the present moment of awareness. And I'm strongly inclined to think that this is, precisely, a non-propositional, non-discursive form of awareness which is none the less properly said to be a matter of cognition.

## **10 Can the subject know its nature as it is in itself?**

In the last section I shifted from talking about present-moment *awareness* to talking about present-moment *direct acquaintance* without explicitly acknowledging that this is a substantive move. As it stands, the Thetic PSA thesis doesn't in speaking of awareness make any claim about *knowledge* of the nature of the subject as it is in itself, still less about complete knowledge of the nature of the subject as it is in itself, of a sort that may seem built into the idea of direct acquaintance. And this, so far, may seem agreeable, because the picture of the subject as some kind of active principle lying behind all its experience, in such a way that one can't know its essential nature, even if one can be present-moment-aware of it as existing, remains beguiling. And given that it's beguiling, it seems good that it should be, so far, compatible with the Thetic PSA thesis.

I think, though, that the Thetic PSA thesis must accept its responsibilities; it must square up and take on the burden of implying that the subject have at least some acquaintance with itself as it is in itself. Supporters of the Thetic PSA thesis like myself should in other words accept that any argument that as-it-is-in-itself self-awareness is impossible is an argument against the Thetic PSA thesis.

The first thing to do, perhaps, is to ask why the picture of the subject as some kind of active principle lying behind all its experience is beguiling. Part of the explanation is that the metaphysics of subject and predicate forces itself on us almost irresistibly, demanding that we distinguish between the subject of awareness and its various states of awareness in a way that I believe we must ultimately reject (quite independently of any commitment to the S=A thesis), and opening the way to the idea that we are at best aware of its states and so not of itself as it is in itself.<sup>36</sup> More respectably, our sceptical instincts are active, as they should always be, and they too invite us to acknowledge that we could perhaps be present-moment

encountered in the spatiotemporal—in particular temporal—form of sensibility).<sup>38</sup> The present suggestion is precisely that this isn't so—

Suppose that it's in the nature of all naturally evolved forms of experience/consciousness that they are in the usual course of things incessantly and seemingly constitutively in the service of the perceptual and agentive survival needs of organisms. It doesn't follow that this is essential to the nature of consciousness, that experience/consciousness must be defined in terms of adaptive function or perceptual content, even in part. The notion of pure consciousness experience is incompatible with any such conception of the nature of experience, but it's certainly not in tension with naturalism, properly understood, or with anything in the theory of evolution by natural selection.<sup>42</sup>

This is another topic that needs separate discussion. Here I simply want to note that even if experience isn't a primordial property of the universe,<sup>43</sup> and even if it came on the scene relatively late, there's no good reason—in fact it doesn't even make sense—to think that it first came on the scene because it had survival value. Natural selection needs something to work on and can only work on what it finds. Experience/consciousness had to exist before it could be exploited and shaped, just as non-experiential matter did. The task of giving an evolutionary explanation of the existence of consciousness is exactly like the task of giving an evolutionary explanation of the existence of matter: there is no such task. Natural

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