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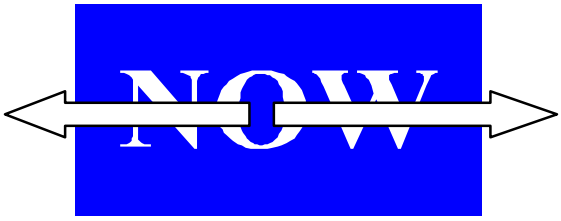

Greville Street Meetings –Sunday Nov 6 & Saturday Nov 29

CONTENTS

This issue is the first of two consecutive NOWletters dedicated to matters arising from our interest in the 'headless' experience. Pertinent to this is a thesis by Brentyn Ramm, which was recently accepted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the ANU. It is entitled *First Person Investigations of Consciousness*. In it he uses the experiments to test hypotheses about the self. Brentyn recently ran a workshop for graduate students in parallel with his research and writing, and I asked him if we could reprint his workshop notes in the NOWletter. His notes form the content of this issue.

I am particularly interested in Brentyn's approach as it deals with the revelation of the experiments from a strongly scientific and what can be regarded as 'secular' angle in contrast to the more familiar application of the experiments as a means of shining a light on the various spiritual traditions.

The thesis itself is available online at:
https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/109192

Recent reader responses and contributions will be included in NOWletter 193 which will appear within a week or so.

Self-Experience

Ohio State University Graduate Student Workshop. Sep 12, 2016

1. Introduction

1.1 The Puzzle of the Self

The puzzle of the self can be recognised by asking: who or what is currently visually aware of the objects in this room? Who or what is hearing these sounds? Who or what is aware of your thoughts? These are all objects of experience (objects in a broad sense of the term), not the experiencer. What is the experiencer of these things?

By self-experience, I will just mean an experience of the self, however, I want to keep open the possibility that I can experience myself without becoming an object of experience, so I drop the 'of' and instead use the term self-experience.

1.2 Three approaches: Third-person, first-person, and a priori

Third-person approach gives answers such as the self is the person, the organism (Olson, 1997, 2003), the brain, brain functions (Dennett 1991; Metzinger, 2004). There is also the first-person approach which takes phenomenal experience as the starting point (Albahari, 2009; Edey, 1997; Evans, 1970; Dainton, 2004; Dainton and Bayne, 2005; Deikman, 1996; Harding, 1986; Strawson, 1997; Zahavi, 2005). Answers from this approach have included that the subject is awareness, for-me-ness, the subject is a bundle of experiences (maybe held by Hume, though this is controversial). In Eastern traditions – the self is described as being silent, still and empty, while others claim that there is no self at all.

The a priori approach, based upon rational deduction, is the kind that was taken by Descartes in arguing for a substance view of the self. I'll be taking the second two approaches, though predominately a phenomenological approach.

Ultimately, we want all three approaches or routes to converge, but I set aside the third-person route here.

1.3 Why use a first-person approach?

As Galen Strawson (1997) points out first-person experience is the source of the problem of the self, so first-person experience is also the place to start in an investigation of the nature of the subject. Ignoring first-person experience in this realm would be like doing physics by investigating our common sense concepts of the physical – it would be entirely fruitless.

1.4 Hume

The phenomenological route to uncovering the nature of the subject hit a roadblock with Hume when he claimed to not be able to find any self in experience: Hume famously reported:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception…. If anyone upon serious and unprejudiced reflection, thinks he has a different notion of himself, I must confess I can reason no longer with him… He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls himself; though I am certain there is no such principle in me (Hume, 1777).

1.5. Aim of the talk

Hume was searching for a substance or thin particular. The aim of this talk is to argue that contrary to Hume, that I can experience a candidate for the self and that it fits the criteria for being a substance. In particular, I want to argue for the prima facie reality of the subject. Prima facie evidence is defeasible, but gives you reason for believing a hypothesis until evidence is found to the contrary.

The argument: Inference to the best explanation. The convergence of a priori considerations and phenomenological evidence provide a reason for accepting the prima facie reality of the subject.

1.6 I'll be using first-person experiments developed by Douglas Harding (1999, 2001, 2002).[1] He was a non-academic philosopher and mystic. He has a popular following, but is virtually unknown by philosophers. He wrote the spiritual classic "On Having No Head". Excerpts appear in The Mind's I, by Douglas Hofstadtler and Daniel Dennett (1982).

1.7 Overview of the talk.

- A priori Route
- Preliminaries
- First-person Experiments
- Results
- Blindspot objection
- Other sensory modalities
- Conclusion

First I'll discuss the a priori route to the self. Then some phenomenological preliminaries. Then we'll do some of Harding's first-person experiments. I'll discuss the results of these experiments. Then I'll respond to an objection which I'll call the blind spot objection. I'll also say some preliminary things about other sensory modalities, and we'll do an eyes closed experiment and an experiment with touch. Finally, I'll make some concluding comments.

2. The A priori Route

[1] The experiments used here all come from Douglas Harding (or workshops by Richard Lang), with the exception of experiment 5 which is my own development on Harding's experimental method.

2.1 Subject = The bearer of experience

A plausible definition of the subject which I will use here is that the subject is the bearer of experience. This leaves open whether the subject is the person, organism, the brain or a non-bodily substance in the traditional sense of substance.

2.2 What should the subject seem like?

Hume was searching for something single, simple and continued in experience, which goes beyond the individual sensations, emotions and thoughts - that is a substance (a thin particular).

I'm going to drop the simplicity criteria as whether or not the subject is divisible isn't relevant for my purposes. I'm also going to set aside continuance and just focus on the subject at a single moment, that is what the subject is like synchronically rather than diachronically.

To know what a self-experience its helpful to know what to look for.

My prediction is that the subject should be 1. Single and 2. Lacking in sensory properties in itself.

1. Singleness. This is built into the definition of a subject. That is, it is conceptually true that 'subject' refers to a single entity. It is also necessary that it is single so as to unify sensory experiences into a single whole. Experience is unified. I am simultaneously aware of this room and its sounds and the feel of this chair. To be a bearer of experience, the subject needs to be single. If there were multiple subjects in my brain, such that one experienced things visually and another experienced sounds, there would be no unified multimodal experience. Or another way of putting it, you need a single subject to which all these things are presented for the experience to be unified.

2. Lacking in sensory properties in itself. The subject needs to lack sensory properties so as to be compatible with bearing them. Consider if the subject was a screen on which sensory experiences were projected. If the screen was red, then all blues would appear purple (Shear, 1998). To be compatible with taking on colours, sounds and feelings and so forth, the subject must, in itself, be colourless, silent, tasteless, feelingless and so forth.

So if I can experience the subject it should be seemingly (1) single and (2) lacking in sensory properties. So we'll be looking for a target that meets these criteria.

3. Preliminaries

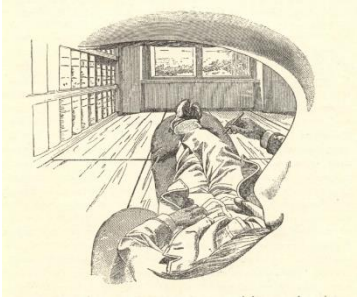

Figure 1. Ernst Mach's first-person self-portrait (Mach, 1890, p. 59).

What we'll be exploring is the first-person perspective, particularly in the visual modality. As a first approximation, it's the very simple observation that you can't see your head.

This is illustrated by the first-person self-portrait by Ernst Mach. He drew what it was like to be him from the first-person perspective with one eye closed. It included the room, his body, a huge handlebar moustache, but no head.

To be more specific, it's not merely that I can't see my head that is of interest rather it's what I experience, if anything, in its place.

'In the matter of living appearance, my visual body includes a large gap at the level of the head.' Merleau-Ponty (1945, p. 108).

We can refer to this as the headless observation. Though I also can't see my back, or the back wall of the room. To be clear, this is not a claim about myself as a person. This is not saying that I believe that Brentyn does not have a head. This is a claim about phenomenal experience.

3.2 Nose Blurs. One objection is that 'I can see my nose! But what kind of nose is it on present evidence? We're setting aside commonsense beliefs here and just going by experience.

I find that it seems to be a large pink translucent blur that stretches from the top to the bottom of the scene. In fact, there are two of them, and they switch from side to side. They also come and go. So they seem very different from the nose you see on someone's face. However, we describe them, it's the visual gap that we are interested in here.

3.3 I see my face in the mirror. Indeed, but notice that your face is in the mirror a couple of feet away, it is never located at the place you are apparently looking from.

Q: What is it like where you are looking from? in your first-person experience?

3.4 Have you ever been face-to-face with anyone in your experience?

Or is it always face-to-no-face? Or face-to-space?

3.5 Just a visual blind spot?

This gap is usually explained away by common sense as merely a visual blind spot, however, I will be arguing that it in fact fits the criteria for characteristics the experiencer needs to possess.

3.6 First-Person Methods

1. Set aside common sense and metaphysical theories. Just go by experience. The attitude for doing the experiments is supposed to be like that of a little child, experiencing something for the first time.

2. Phenomenal Contrast (Siegel, 2007). This is a method endorsed by Susanna Siegel. Here two phenomena are compared so as to make salient the phenomenal difference between them.

3. Apparatus. We'll also be using apparatus such as your hands for making the contrast and for directing attention.

4. First-Person Experiments

4.1. Experiment 1: Exploring the Gap

Hold up your hands in front of you as if you were holding a basketball. Notice the gap between your gaps, and how it contains part of the room. Now very slowly bring your hands back. Notice how your hands seem to grow larger, and the gap between them also grows. They begin to blur and finally disappear altogether into this gap. Bringing them forwards again watch as they reappear from the gap. Repeat this a few times to get a sense of what this seemingly empty region is like. [2]

4.2. Experiment 2: Tracing Out the Gap

How many eyes do you seem to be looking out of on present experience? Do you seem to be looking out of two small windows in a head or a single large opening? How large does the gap seem? Does it seem to be head sized? Put your arms out and trace out the apparent edges of the view (or the visual field). It's kind of oval shaped. I find that the gap is seemingly as large as the scene. This space seemingly encompasses the room from wall to wall. Also notice that it has nothing discernible outside of it. Use your finger to trace out the boundary of a chair or some other object. Notice that it is in a surrounding environment such as a room. Does the visual field have anything outside of it? Does it have a visibly discernible surrounding environment? Or does it visually have nothing outside of it? Finally, is there one gap or multiple gaps? I only find one. That is, it is phenomenally singular. [3]

4.3 Experiment 3: The Frame Experiment

Use your fingers to form a frame through which you can look. Compare your fingers to what is in the finger-frame. Notice that your fingers are coloured and opaque. You cannot see through your fingers, but the interior of the frame is transparent. Your fingers frame a gap. Also notice how when you move the frame around that it contains anything in the room: doors, books, parts of walls. It is because the frame is empty that it is able to act as capacity for things. Does this also apply to what you seem to be looking out of? To test this, slowly bring the frame back (towards where others see your face) and see if this absence seems to fit here. Notice how your fingers seem to grow larger as they come closer, and how the gap in the frame also gets larger, and thus encompasses more of the room. Keep attending to the gap, bring the frame all the way back, and let your fingers drop. Notice that the gap seemingly fits here perfectly, but unlike the finger frame it has no discernible boundaries. I seem to be looking out of an open space.[4]

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[2] See Harding (1996, p. 5) for a version of this experiment.
[3] Thank you to Richard Lang for introducing this experiment to me.

[4] This is a version of the Card Experiment, in which you use a card with a head sized hole in it. See for example Harding (1999, p. 114-116; 2001, p. 42-43). This method involves a phenomenal comparison

4.4 Experiment 4: The Pointing Experiment

Look at your finger and notice that it has colour, shape, texture, wrinkles etc. It is obviously a thing. Now with this thing, by pointing, direct your attention to a far wall. Notice that your finger (a thing, with shape, colour and extension) is pointing at another thing, with shape, colour and extension. Also notice that your finger and the wall are separated by a gap. Now point to the floor. Notice the patterns, colours and textures. Now point to your foot. Once again you are pointing at a shaped and coloured thing. Now very slowly, tracing your pointing finger up your body, notice that this pattern of duality between object and object persists. Finger–gap–legs. Finger–gap–stomach. Finger–gap–chest. Now bring your finger up in line with where others see your face. Finger–gap–??? Suddenly we have seemingly lost the duality. From your present experience is your finger pointing at an object, a thing? Does there seems to be a head or face here? Continue pointing and please go through this checklist. What is your finger pointing at? Do there seem to be: (1) Any colours here? (2) Any shape here? (3) Any texture here? (4) Any wrinkles here? (5) Any movement here? Is it true to say that this space seems to encompass everything on show, including your finger, hand, arm, body and the room? Finally, aren't you also apparently pointing at the viewer or at least the looker? [5]

5. Results

The goal of the experiments was to bring attention back to what it is like to be you in your own experience. Common sense says that I am looking out of a head – an opaque, solid thing. That is, I am a thing in the world that looks at other things. The results of the experiments were in complete contrast to common sense.

When I attend to where I am apparently looking from, I find:

(1) A single gap or space

(2) Lack of sensory visual features – no colours or shapes.

These were predicted to be defining characteristics of the subject. I also found:

(3) This space apparently encompasses the visual scene.

It is as wide as the scene. This is consistent with it being the bearer of the visual scene. Furthermore, it was found:

(4) I am apparently pointing at myself or the looker. I seem to be looking from here. We can call this additional phenomenology a "sense of self". This can be distinguished from the gap phenomenology. I also argue in another paper that the sense of self cannot be reduced to the viewpoint. Whether it can be or not is beside the point here,

rather than a phenomenal contrast. It demonstrates that there is no phenomenal difference between the gap framed by your fingers and the gap from which you are apparently looking.

[5] This is a form of meditation. The experiment is most effective if you do not rush through it. I suggest forgetting philosophy for a short while - relax, sit quietly, and point here for at least 30 seconds. For examples of the pointing experiment see: Harding (1999, p. 8-9, 41-42; 2000, p. 8-9).

because we are interested in the gap experience, and how it fits the criteria for being a self-experience that we arrived at by a priori reasoning.

These additional findings that this space apparently encompasses the scene and that I seem to be located here provide further support for the notion that I am experiencing myself. Hence contrary to Hume, I find that there is an experienceable candidate for the subject.

6. The blind spot objection

According to common sense there is nothing special about this spot, it is just a visual blind spot. Perhaps we can say that here is just a pure visual absence. I am pointing outside the visual field, and thus of course what I find is a lack of visual experience. There is something right about calling this a visual absence or blind spot, but what kind is it? Take, for instance, a blind spot where I cannot see a car because it is behind a truck. I see the truck but not the car. This is a blind spot by occlusion. It is important to note that these types of blind spots are not seen as nothing but have a sensory phenomenal character. Even the nothingness of outer space appears black not as a pure absence. Another type of blind spot is a blind spot by absence. Examples of these blind spots are holes and gaps. I see holes and gaps. When I look at a gap formed by a doorway there is an openness to the experience. A pure blind spot, or pure visual absence, on the other hand has no phenomenal character whatsoever. It is a complete absence of experience. So the question is whether this spot is like that.

Experiment 5: Pure Blind Spot and Blind Spot by Absence

(1) Pure blind spot: Look directly ahead and move your hand slowly to the left. Notice that your hand begins to blur and eventually disappears altogether. You have found the 'edge' of your visual field. Off the edge of the visual field, I find a true blind spot, a pure visual absence. The visual scene just ends. There is no experience outside of the visual field. (2) Blind spot by absence. If I merely experience nothing here, if it is a pure blind spot like off the edge of my visual field then what it is like to attend there should be exactly the same as here. Point off to the side and attend to that spot. I am pointing at nothing whatsoever, no things, no colours, no shapes, but there is nothing it is like to experience that location. It is a bare lack of experience. Now by contrast point here. There is a phenomenal difference between the two spots. I am again pointing at no things, colours, or shapes, but there is something it is like to attend here. Rather than no experience at all, there is a phenomenal character of spacious emptiness. This is a more like a blind spot by absence than a pure blind spot. I experience this location like I do a hole, not the same as the complete lack of phenomenal character outside of my visual field. Finally, I seem to be pointing at myself. So, this is not a bare lack of experience, there's a phenomenal character of emptiness and a sense of self. So, I don't think that the blind spot objection correctly describes the phenomenology.

7. Other Sensory Modalities

7.1 Some preliminary observations

Suppose someone accepts that they can distinguish a space here which functions as a bearer for the visual field. This would not be sufficient to count as the experiencer unless it encompassed all sensory modalities. The objection is that the experiments do not provide a phenomenally singular experiencer, and hence it provides an inadequate candidate for self-experience. Certainly, the gap here is experienced visually (as lacking of colours and shapes), but is it merely encompassing the visual scene?

I do not just experience the table visually, but also its hardness and smoothness. This hardness and smoothness is experienced as out there with the visual features of the table – they are perfectly integrated with the visual features. Consider also when someone speaks the sound is not just an additional element, but is heard as coming from their mouth. I find that this space or gap seems to encompass not just visually experienced properties and objects but that it includes properties from other sensory modalities such as tactile and auditory properties.

We'll explore this more with the Eyes Closed Experiment.

7.2 Experiment 6: Eyes Closed

Attend to your bodily sensations. Attend to one of your hands. Going by present experience, how many fingers does it have? Can you feel 5 distinct digits, or is what you feel shapeless, and changing? How many ears do you have on present evidence? What shape is your face? Do you have well defined face, or various fleeting sensations that you associate with a face? Would you even know what a face was if you had never seen or touched one? How large is your body? Are you in a body on present evidence? Is there any separation between your 'bodily-sensations' and those of your clothes and the chair in which you are sitting? Where are the boundaries of your body? Are there any boundaries between your bodily sensations and the darkness?

Now listen to sounds. Some are near and some are far. Some are loud and some are soft. They arise and then are gone again. There is also a silence. Some describe this by saying that the sounds are arising in the silence. Attend to your thoughts. Count in your mind. Are these thoughts happening in a box (a head). Or are there no boundaries between your thoughts and the sounds of the room? I find that thoughts, sounds, and bodily sensations make up one field of experience. Is that true for you? Now slowly open your eyes and watch the room reappear. Your phenomenal world is flooded with colours and shapes.

7.3 Experiment 7: Touching Your Head

What about when I touch my head? With your eyes open slowly bring your hands towards where others see your head. I find that they seem to grow larger (take up more of the visual field) until the fingers seem to disappear into a void or gap here. Then I find various sensations of hair, forehead, cheek, nose, lips. Are those feelings attached to a solid, opaque head here on present experience? I find that when I touch

here feelings of solidity and pressure occur in this transparent *space*, but then soon fade again. I don't continually experience my nose, or my cheek, or my eyes, or my teeth, nor do these sensations all occur at once. Rather there are gaps of no feeling. I can't build up a head here that encloses me. As soon as I stop touching it the 'thing' is lost. I need to use tactile imagination to build up a head that is precisely shaped and is present all at once. I also tend to imagine what I am touching. I associate that squishy bulgy feeling with a visual image of a nose, and the feeling of a row of hard bits with a tongue running along teeth. To me at least it seems that these touch sensations all occur in this open space.

8. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to challenge Hume's failure to experience the self. I hypothesised that the subject should be: (1) Single and (2) lacking in sensory properties in itself. Contrary to Hume, there is an experience which conforms to these characteristics. In particular, the experience fits the criteria for being a substance. Furthermore, this *space* also seemed to (3) encompass the visual scene and (4) and I seemed to be located here. Finally, (5) I found support for the hypothesis from other sensory modalities in that this gap also seems to encompass sound and tactile properties. I also found that there was a single experiential field in which all sensory phenomena arise.

The argument was an inference to the best explanation, in that a priori reasoning gave us a guide as to what the subject should be like to function as a bearer of experience, and the phenomenology confirmed that there was a target that fits these criteria. So, the a priori and phenomenological routes converge on the same conclusion.

I conclude that these phenomenological findings provide prima facie evidence for the existence of the subject.

Brentyn J. Ramm

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Brentyn J. Ramm

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Meeting Programme

Sunday 6th November – The Sense of Self and Damasio – Garry Booth

Saturday 26th November – Judy Bruce and the Brentyn Ramm approach.

Note the one-off day change from Sunday to Saturday for the second of these two meetings.