

Miri Albahari

Witness-Consciousness

Its Definition, Appearance and Reality¹

Abstract: *G.E. Moore alludes to a notion of consciousness that is diaphanous, elusive to attention, yet detectable. Such a notion, I suggest, approximates what Bina Gupta has called ‘witness-consciousness’ — in particular, the aspect of mode-neutral awareness with intrinsic phenomenal character. This paper offers a detailed definition and defence of the appearance and reality of witness-consciousness. While I claim that witness-consciousness captures the essence of subjectivity, and so must be accounted for in the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness, it is not to be confused with the more commonly defended notion of ‘for-me-ness’.*

Introduction

[T]hough philosophers have recognised that *something* distinct is meant by consciousness, they have never yet had a clear conception of *what* that something is. They have not been able to hold *it* and *blue* before their minds and to compare them, in the same way in which they can compare *blue* and *green*. And this for the reason I gave above: namely that the moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see what, distinctly, it is, it seems to vanish: it seems as if we had before us a mere emptiness. When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element is as if it were diaphanous. Yet it *can* be distinguished if we look attentively enough, and if we know that there is something to look for (G.E. Moore, 1903, p. 450).

Correspondence:

Miri Albahari, Philosophy Dept., The University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley WA 6009, Australia. Email: albahari@cyllene.uwa.edu.au

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This paper is an attempt to provide a clearer conception and defence of what I believe G.E. Moore was getting at when he spoke of consciousness as being diaphanous, elusive to introspective attention, and yet a distinct something. I suggest that this something most closely approximates what Bina Gupta (1998), in keeping with Advaita Vedanta terminology, has called *witness-consciousness*. I define ‘witness-consciousness’ (more modestly than in Advaita) as *mode-neutral awareness with intrinsic phenomenal character*.² I argue that witness-consciousness is real, and so must eventually be addressed if the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness is to be resolved.

The ‘hard problem’ of consciousness seeks to discover how subjective qualities fit into the material world. Subjective (or phenomenal) qualities are those qualities where there is ‘something it is like’ to have them. There is something it is like to experience the colour green, to hear the cry of a seagull and feel nostalgia at the smell of rotting seaweed. Unique phenomenal feels (or *qualia*) are associated with each of the five sense modalities, as well as with such mental capacities as thinking and feeling emotions. At any one time, many of these qualities are unfolding in the mind, creating a rich and changing tapestry of experience.

Such qualities are the typical focus for those interested in the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness. But is this tapestry all that there is to subjective conscious life, such that explaining these qualities will completely resolve the ‘hard problem’? Or is there also something more to conscious life, something with a phenomenal feel that is not reducible to the distinguishable threads of colour, taste and emotion? When enlisting an extensive catalogue of qualia in his book *The Conscious Mind* (1996), David Chalmers (who coined the term ‘hard problem of consciousness’) mentioned a ‘deep and intangible phenomenology of the self’ which he likened to a ‘background hum’ that is ‘very hard to pin down’ (1996, p. 10). Philosophers have commonly noted that our experience seems bifurcated into the objects of we can be aware (the rich tapestry) and a subject that seems aware of them. The background hum seems connected, I will argue, to the subject — in particular, an observing aspect of the subject to which the experiences are presented. This observing aspect appears not to be identified with any

[2] In my book *Analytical Buddhism: The Two-Tiered Illusion of Self* (2006), the term ‘witness-consciousness’ is used to convey only the aspect of mode-neutral awareness, but I now wish to expand the term to include the dimension of intrinsic phenomenal character. The term ‘witness-consciousness’, in this paper, is actually equivalent to what I term ‘awareness’ in my book. Also, when I wrote the book, I was unaware of Bina Gupta’s prior usage of the (Advaitic) term ‘witness-consciousness’ so I hope it is not too late to acknowledge that now.

particular sense-modality, and so is, in this capacity, mode-neutral. While it seems unable to directly observe itself, it is nevertheless aware of itself as something immediately present in experience — as if the tapestry is known not to a mere vacuum. This intrinsically phenomenal awareness is what I will be meaning by ‘witness-consciousness’.

A useful way to initially grasp the concept of witness-consciousness is by considering what is common to several Eastern meditation practices. In these practices, one is encouraged to develop the witnessing stance by becoming more acutely aware of the thoughts, feelings and experiences as they enter and exit the mind. It has been reported that in very advanced states of meditation (*nirvikalpa samadhi*), a mode of pure *objectless* conscious experience can be attained where there is *something it is like* to be in such a state. If such modes are really possible, then they would suggest that this subject-awareness has its own intrinsic phenomenal character — always present but largely unnoticed in ordinary conscious states. It would also suggest that such awareness is ontologically basic to the conscious mind — at least in comparison to the impermanent (but less elusive) flux of thoughts and feelings. If such an aspect were to exist, it could have far-reaching implications for the philosophy of mind, which seeks to understand the fundamental nature of consciousness. But perhaps because it is elusive, this background hum of subject-awareness has rarely been canvassed in Western philosophy of mind as a feature that would have to be addressed if the hard problem of consciousness were to explain all the phenomenal data. From the perspective of analytic philosophy, it has been largely off the horizon.³

The paper, as reflected in the title, proceeds in three parts. In Part One, I offer a more detailed definition of witness-consciousness,

[3] While a handful of current Western thinkers (often familiar with Eastern traditions) give attention to a version of this concept (or something similar): for example Gupta (1998), Wilber (2001), Dainton (2002), Deikman (1996), Forman (1998), Shear (1996) and Woodruff Smith (1986), the notion of witness-consciousness, as portrayed here, is not a mainstream concept in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind (although historically, thinkers such as Moore and Hamilton endorsed versions of it). Some thinkers, such as Caston (2002), Kriegel (2004) and Janzen (2006) have followed in the tradition of Brentano and Aristotle by developing self-representational accounts of consciousness that bear some similarity to witness-consciousness. The main difference is that the ‘witnessing analogue’ can never be objectless, as it is invariably part of a more complex state of consciousness that has a primary focal object. There are also thinkers, such as Zahavi (2005) and Williford (2006) who espouse, along these lines, a similar notion of ‘for-me-ness’, to be addressed in some detail in this paper (and which Zahavi attributes to major figures in the phenomenological tradition, such as Husserl, Sartre, Heidegger and Henry). None of these accounts, however, specifically discuss how the phenomenal character of such consciousness could impact upon the ‘hard problem’.

which connects the notion of the phenomenal background hum to that of a subject's (mode-neutral) *modus operandi* (to know, to observe, to be aware, to witness). Part of this exercise attempts to distinguish the concept of witness-consciousness from its close cousin 'for-me-ness'. In Part Two, I argue that witness-consciousness has *prima facie* reality in the conscious mind; it is, we might say, a real appearance. That is, it seems to be a genuine feature of the conscious landscape, rather than something that turns out, upon more careful analysis, to be the mere background flow of unattended objects, or just the feeling of for-me-ness that belongs to the flow of experience. In Part Three, I argue that witness-consciousness has not only *prima facie* reality, but actual reality. It is not illusory, in other words. As a real feature of the mind, central to phenomenal consciousness, it must be faced up to in the 'hard problem' of consciousness.⁴

Part One: The Definition of Witness-Consciousness

The goal of this section is to clarify the definition of witness-consciousness and to distinguish it from for-me-ness. Gupta has highlighted a number of key features that characterise witness-consciousness in Advaita Vedanta, some of which I treat as central to this paper.⁵ The features I take to be central are (quoting Gupta):

1. [It is] the basis for all knowing [but] different from the object known. It is implied in every act of knowing. It is the ultimate subject; it can never become an object of knowledge.
2. It is the pure element of awareness in all knowing ...
3. It shines by its own light; it is self-luminous (1998, p. 18).

(1) and (2) suggest a common element of *knowing* (*qua* observation) that is present in every act of witnessing. Such knowing is, in this way, mode-neutral, not restricted to any particular sensory or cognitive modality such as hearing or thinking. (3) can be viewed as an answer to a question implicitly raised by (1). If witness-consciousness is implied in every act of knowing and yet can never be an object of knowledge, how can one know it exists? The answer is that witness-consciousness, as pure subject-awareness, is by its very nature

[4] This paper can be seen to develop some arguments that were presented in chapters 5–7 of *Analytical Buddhism*, while other arguments in those chapters may be seen to buttress some of the ideas presented in this paper.

[5] I am not denying that witness-consciousness could have the richer character ascribed to it in the Advaita Vedanta tradition. It is just that defending the richer version would lie beyond the scope of a single paper.

self-effluent: not to be known in the way we know objects (such as thoughts, tables, colours, sensations). Just as a light cannot illuminate itself by shedding beams upon itself, witness-consciousness cannot know itself as it would an object. Yet its very nature guarantees that it is not 'dark inside'; it knows itself simply by being itself. This is immediately consistent with what Moore said when he spoke of consciousness as being diaphanous yet detectable. Partaking in the nature of pure subjectivity, it cannot be a separate *object* of knowledge; and yet there is something it is like to be the subject of this witness-consciousness, such it adds a distinctive, indeed fundamental character to conscious life. In accordance with these reflections, I define witness-consciousness as (a) mode-neutral knowing or awareness with (b) intrinsic phenomenal character.

What, more precisely, is the connection between mode-neutral awareness and the subject of experience? When philosophers refer to a bifurcation in human experience between subject and object, the subject is usually characterised as something that occupies a particular psycho-physical perspective on the world (so it is not, in Nagel's terms, a 'view from nowhere') and which has a *modus operandi* of being broadly aware of objects in the world, including the subject's own thoughts and experiences. It seems the *modus operandi* is pertinent to witness-consciousness. Mait Edey puts it like this:

Let the term "subject" refer to I-who-am-aware, whatever opinion we may hold of what that "I" may be. To be a subject, in this sense, is to be aware or conscious. I, subject, can be aware of some object; I can focus awareness in attention paid to the object; and I can distinguish myself from the object I attend to (1997, p. 527).

Antonio Damasio writes:

Like it or not we cannot escape the fact that the mind seems split, like a house divided, between the knower and known (1999, p. 191).

Of note is that the subject's *modus operandi* of knowing or being aware is never specified in terms of any one particular mode of awareness, such as seeing, hearing, thinking or tasting. The awareness is always specified in a generic way that makes it common to all such modalities, which is why I refer to it as 'mode-neutral'. Mode-neutral awareness is not to be confused with the more self-conscious act of introspective awareness that constitutes deliberate reflection *that* one is having such-and-such an experience (although this may count as evidence for its *prima facie* reality); it is the raw registration that goes with the simple having of any experience. Barry Dainton alludes to something along these lines when he describes a concept of awareness

as being ‘a simple sensing or apprehending of *what* is presented’ (2002, p. 32). Its basic or primitive nature is also reflected in the idea that such knowing can be attentive or inattentive, and so is not limited to acts of attention.

What of the intrinsic phenomenal character? Dainton usefully distinguishes between what he calls ‘pure awareness’ and ‘tangible awareness’ (2002, p. 32). Pure awareness has no intrinsic phenomenal character; it is no more than the act of pure sensing. Tangible awareness, by contrast, has an intrinsic ‘something it is like’ character that is not reducible to the specific qualia associated with any particular modality such as vision or taste. With its own phenomenal character, witness-consciousness corresponds closely to what Dainton calls ‘tangible awareness’. In the following sub-section on for-me-ness, I say more about the notion of its intrinsic phenomenal character.

Distinguishing witness-consciousness from ‘for-me-ness’

I have mentioned that there is a similar concept of consciousness from which witness-consciousness must nevertheless be distinguished. This concept identifies consciousness (or the subjectivity of experience) with what has sometimes been termed the ‘for-me-ness’ of a conscious experience. Because for-me-ness is closely linked to the first-personal perspective on experience, it is tempting to identify it with the subject-involved witness-consciousness, but closer scrutiny will reveal that this move must be avoided.

Dan Zahavi (2005) identifies the for-me-ness (which he calls ‘first-personal givenness’ or ‘mineness’) with an invariant property of experiences, where each experience instantiates a particular ‘mode of givenness’ (such as imagining, recollecting, perceiving, etc.).⁶ Although one’s attention will normally be captured by objects in the world (such as tables, people, wine, events) rather than by the experiences through which they are presented (perceptions, recollections, imaginings, etc.), those experiences will still add something to the ‘what it is likeness’ of one’s conscious life. Specifically, they will add the very property of their being presented or given directly ‘to me’ in the first-person. The property of for-me-ness is had by every one of those experiences, and it is that invariant aspect which enables one to effortlessly determine that various experiences belong to the very same stream of consciousness (2005, pp. 122–32). For Zahavi, first-

[6] Zahavi attributes his general position to key figures of the phenomenological tradition, such as Heidegger, Sartre, Henry, but in particular, Husserl.

person givenness is necessary for something to qualify as an experience:

... first-personal givenness of experiential phenomena is not something incidental to their being, a mere varnish that the experiences could lack without ceasing to be experiences. On the contrary, this first-personal givenness makes the experiences *subjective*. To put it another way, first-personal givenness entails a built-in self-reference, a primitive experiential self-referentiality (2005, p. 122). ... When we investigate appearing objects, we also disclose ourselves as datives of manifestation, as those to whom objects appear (2005, p. 123).

There is enough here to discern that (at least Zahavi's) first-person givenness (or for-me-ness) is not identical to witness-consciousness. Structurally, they belong to different parts of the conscious field. The for-me-ness is a relational (although invariant) property that is had by the different experiences that come and go. It presents as a feature of experiences that *points them in the direction* of a subject (whether or not there in fact is such a subject).⁷ Witness-consciousness, by contrast, does not present as a feature of the experiences in the stream of consciousness. It presents as a central aspect of *that to which the experiences are pointing* — the *modus operandi* of the subject that has them.

While Ken Williford (2006) offers an account of for-me-ness that differs in its details from Zahavi's, it can nevertheless be distinguished from witness-consciousness along the same lines. Unlike Zahavi, Williford regards for-me-ness to be a feature of the entire (self-representing) conscious episode, containing all the experiences in their different modes of givenness, rather than something that is had by each individual experience within a conscious episode. (Williford indeed speaks of a 'conscious experience' in the global sense). Nevertheless, Williford attributes the for-me-ness to observable conscious experience, rather than to that which seems to observe it. So in sum, for-me-ness is a feature of the experience(s) observed; witness-consciousness, a feature of the subject that observes the experiences.

This asymmetry in the structure of witness-consciousness and for-me-ness indicates a further important difference between them. Williford has noted that while we typically attend to the objects that the experience is about, we can, if we choose, focus 'onto the experience itself and away from the objects it presents' (2006, p. 123). Given that for-me-ness is an aspect of the conscious experience then this,

[7] Zahavi denies the existence of a separate subject to which the experiences are presented, but it is enough, at this stage, to note that there *seems* to be a subject to which experiences are presented.

too, can become the focus of an attentive (or in Zahavi's terms, 'reflective') act, even if its phenomenal character is not like that of the five senses and it is usually marginal.⁸ By contrast, we have noted that it is impossible for witness-consciousness to ever become the focal object of an act of awareness. Partaking in the nature of pure subjectivity, witness-consciousness is built into the very act of being aware (whether the awareness is attentive or inattentive) and Gilbert Ryle has argued convincingly that a particular act (whether perceptual, performative or otherwise) can never, logically, be the direct object of its own performance (1994, pp. 39–40). Just as a flashlight can never directly illuminate itself, nor a human eye directly see itself, nor a comedic skit directly imitate itself, so witness-consciousness, the *modus operandi* of a subject, can never directly observe itself in the act of witnessing. Being of intrinsic phenomenal character, however, it immediately knows itself in the act of witnessing by being itself, so its existence does not go undetected.

From this it does not follow that one cannot become relatively more *cognisant* of witness-consciousness, by becoming more mindful (as opposed to forgetful) of its presence.⁹ To become mindful of X is to become sharply attuned to the fact of X's occurring in the present moment, as opposed to being like the daydreaming truck driver who, while minimally watching the road, has his mind elsewhere. But being mindful of witness-consciousness cannot be quite the same thing as *attending* to witness-consciousness, at least if we define attention with reference to ordinary cases, that of a subject attending to objects that seem separate from its nature as an attending subject.

When subject S attends to object O, then (at least) two conditions are fulfilled: (a) S is mindful (as opposed to forgetful) of O and (b) O is a focal (as opposed to marginal/peripheral) object for S, such that S can hold O before the mind's eye (if not the literal eye) and examine O in more detail. In the case of witness-consciousness, W, I suggest that S can become mindful of W, but that W, because it is integral to the

[8] Williford holds that the phenomenal character that ensues from a conscious episode representing itself is non-sensory, non-propositional and 'empty'. An empty representation is one where the content of a conscious episode encompasses more than just the data directly apprehended: for example, when seeing a cat, we 'fill in' for the dimensions that are hidden from our field of vision. The additional content, although empty in this way (and so lacking information), makes a difference to what the experience is like for us. Analogously, when a conscious state represents itself, we are (usually marginally) aware, over and above all the perceptual content, of that state being *for* a subject; the content of this empty representation, for Williford, constitutes the subjectivity of experience (2006, pp. 120–4).

[9] How to exactly explain the structure of being mindful of witness-consciousness is a topic that I choose not to address here.

very nature of S's awareness (or eye of the mind!), can never become a focal object to be held and examined before the mind's eye, as one might examine a refrigerator-hum (or a feeling of for-me-ness). The kind of awareness that a subject has of witness-consciousness can thus be forgetful or mindful, but never focal or marginal (as exclusively befitting to *objects*).¹⁰ This has an important bearing on the type of phenomenal character that witness-consciousness could conceivably have. While ubiquitous and immediate it will also, as Moore describes it, be *diaphanous*, insofar as it is qualifies that which is seen through, rather than that which is seen through *to*. Its phenomenal character will thus be of a fundamentally different type to that of objects (external, sensory or mental) of focal or marginal attention (such as the refrigerator-hum). It can perhaps be best described as necessarily *pre-attentional*, with an underlying contribution to conscious life, whether one is forgetful or mindful of its presence.

Part Two: The Prima-Facie Reality of Witness-Consciousness

In this section, I argue that witness-consciousness has *prima facie* reality. To have *prima facie* reality, something must withstand a scrutiny of its (first-person) appearance: careful introspection and/or logical analysis will not make the appearance 'crumble' from the purview of that first-person perspective. Such considerations may indeed reinforce the impression of its first-person phenomenal reality (as shaking a tree reinforces the impression of its solidity). By contrast, something that lacks *prima facie* reality will at 'first glance' seem subjectively real, only to crumble upon more careful subjective scrutiny (the impression that peripheral vision has the same uniformity as foveal vision is such an example). *Prima facie* reality, however, does not imply reality proper — it can still turn out that while subjectively

[10] Lest there be terminological confusion, it is worth noting that Zahavi rejects the idea that the first-personal givenness of experience, in its unreflective mode, is to be considered an object of experience. He claims that so long as we are attending to external objects, we live *through* our experiences, and so they are not in this context given as (focal) objects. However, Zahavi does hold that it is possible to reflect upon our experiential life (including first-person givenness) and so 'place ourselves in contrast' to that part of it, seizing on it as an object (2005, p. 64). He rejects the idea, however, that this is to be analysed as *attending* to those objects, as he holds that the notion of attention (with its focal/marginal distinction) is only befitting to objects of the external world (2005, p. 90). The notion of *reflection*, he argues, is appropriate to describe the act of focusing on one's inner experiences such as for-me-ness. I use the term 'attention' more broadly than Zahavi, to cover anything being taken as a focal object — inner or outer. The important point is that witness-consciousness, unlike for-me-ness, can never be taken as focal object in either of these senses — attentive or reflective.

persisting in the face of such scrutiny, a phenomenon is illusory nevertheless (think of voices in the head).

It seems hard to define witness-consciousness — in a way that gives the concept some intuitive traction — without also giving traction to the argument that witness-consciousness has *prima facie* reality. That is to say, the very act of pointing to a commonly made subject-object distinction, a distinction made from within human experience, seems to support a conclusion for the apparent reality of that subject's *modus operandi*. If there didn't already seem to be such a pervasive distinction in our conscious experience, then we arguably couldn't begin to get a handle on the concept of witness-consciousness.

Still there is room for scepticism. Perhaps careful scrutiny of 'for-me-ness', a property had, after all, by the *experiences* (not the subject), can altogether usurp the impression of there being a subject of experience with its *modus operandi* of witness-consciousness. Another possibility is that the supposed bifurcation of experience into subject and object is in fact nothing more than the bifurcation between things that are the focus of attention (like these words) and things of which one is peripherally aware (like the sensation of sitting down). C.O. Evans (1970) has proposed such a view. The plausibility of these alternative conjectures may well be reinforced by the dualistic way that language operates, with its subjects, verbs and objects. We have become so accustomed to speaking dualistically (e.g., saying such things as '*I am aware of X*'), that we may think that something of metaphysical import lurks behind the '*I*', when in fact there could be nothing. The goal of this section is to show that witness-consciousness (as the *modus operandi* of a subject) really does *seem* to be a feature of our conscious states — and so is in the ballpark for further explanation. While its *prima facie* reality may be compatible with other types of consciousness, such as for-me-ness, it cannot be usurped by them. I approach this task by addressing in turn the two main features of witness-consciousness: mode-neutral awareness and intrinsic phenomenal character.

The prima facie reality of mode-neutral awareness

While mode-neutral awareness is not to be identified with the ability to *reflectively* tell that one is hearing, seeing and so forth, the ability to do so does serve as evidence for what would *seem* to be an aspect of mode-neutral awareness. If asked, we can consciously tell in a flash, from the first-person perspective, that a particular sense-modality,

such as seeing, is operative. And we don't see that we see; we *know* that we see. We don't think that we think; we *know* that we think. This apparent epistemic vantage-point from which one can consciously survey the activity of various sense modalities seems mode-neutral.

The argument is further buttressed by considerations about the unity of consciousness, when it is considered pre-theoretically, before any attempt to explain it.¹¹ At any one time, a subject will seem consciously aware of a number of different sense-experiences. Such awareness need not be attentive. The cry of the seagull may form the background to a conscious experience of attending to the smell of seaweed. Yet both the sound and the smell seem simultaneously presented to a unified 'field' of conscious awareness such that they seem to belong to a single subject of experience. Whether there really is such a thing as a unitary subject of experience is not of current concern; what matters is that there seems to be conscious awareness (to a subject) of there being more than one experience at a time. We don't *smell* that we are smelling rotting seaweed at the same time as hearing the seagull — we *are aware* of smelling rotting seaweed at the same time as hearing the seagull. We seem to know it effortlessly, often passively, without having to reflect on the fact. By simultaneously apprehending (and thereby being cognisant of) a multitude of sensory and mental experiences, such awareness would appear epistemically neutral between the different modes of 'givenness', as opposed to being reducible to any one of them.

Can the property of for-me-ness eliminate the apparent need to posit a unifying mode-neutral awareness? On reflection, it would seem not. That is because the very notion of for-me-ness is one that contains reference to a *me* that the experiences are *for* — a *me* that must, on further analysis, implicate mode-neutral awareness. Recall Zahavi: 'first-personal givenness entails a built-in self-reference, a primitive experiential self-referentiality (122). ... [W]hen we investigate appearing objects, we also disclose ourselves as datives of manifestation, as those to whom objects appear' (123). If, as Zahavi hopes, for-me-ness is to make the manifold of different experiences (e.g. perceptual, imaginative, recollecting) seem simultaneously present to the very same *me*, then the sort of awareness had by this supposed *me* must be a unifying, and hence mode-neutral, awareness. Put another way, the part of the *me* that seems to simultaneously apprehend the presence of these different experience-types as being *for* the same *me*,

[11] An excellent depiction of (synchronic) unity can be found in Bayne and Chalmers (2003, p. 23).

cannot *itself* seem to be a specific mode of such experience (such as recollecting, imagining, perceiving); it must seem neutral between them if it is to be unifying between them. Hence mode-neutral awareness is implicit in the very notion of for-me-ness.

This notably does not entail that the property of for-me-ness implies the reality of an actual separate me that the experiences are for — and hence it does not imply the reality of a mode-neutral awareness that does the unifying. To the contrary, both Zahavi and Williford happen to hold that a separate me (including any witnessing that may be integral to it) is superfluous to the ontology of for-me-ness. They contend that all that is needed to explain the structures of consciousness (such as unity and the Moorean intuition) is the *impression* of a me that the experiences are for — and the very feeling of for-me-ness, had by the experiences (or global conscious experience as it represents itself), gives us that. In Part Three I challenge the plausibility of this position, but for now we can note that regardless of whether the me or its mode-neutral awareness is actually real, the *prima facie* reality of mode-neutral awareness is integral to the property of for-me-ness.

There is an alternative account that does, however, more seriously threaten to damage the *prima facie* reality of mode-neutral awareness. Evans (1970, pp. 148–50) has argued that the apparent bifurcation of experience into subject (with its background hum) and objects amounts to nothing more than a division between objects that are attended to and those that are not. What we casually think of as a subject of experience reveals itself, upon more careful inspection, to be the mere collection of objects that are not being paid attention to at that time (he calls this ‘unprojected consciousness’). So for Evans, there is not only no such thing as a subject of experience (and hence witness-consciousness), there is not even the *appearance* of such a thing. Any *prima facie* reality of witness-consciousness, with its mode-neutral awareness, will itself be an illusion created by mistaking the background of unattended-to items for an elusive subject of experience.

Does Evans’s account accord with observations about the structure of conscious experience, such that more careful reflection will reveal to us nothing more than a division between objects that are attended to and those that are not? Careful scrutiny will reveal that this cannot be correct. In overlooking the apparent *modus operandi* of a subject — the capacity to observe things, whether attentively or inattentively — Evans’s account has odd implications. Imagine, for example, that one is attending to an orchestra while enduring an unattended pain in the back. Does it seem to the person as if her back-pain — along with all

the other manifold of unattended phenomenal items — is attending to the orchestra? That is how it would have to seem, if Evans was right in supposing that ‘the subject’ of experience *seems* to be nothing more than the cacophony of background experiences. But it does not seem that way at all; careful scrutiny does not dissolve, but *reinforces* the impression that it is one and the same subject is both attending to the orchestra while being inattentively aware of the back-pain. The mechanism of attending and inattending seems to involve the very same subject, via its capacity for mode-neutral awareness of these different phenomena.

From these reflections we can conclude that mode-neutral awareness, in all likelihood, has *prima facie* reality.

The prima facie reality of intrinsic phenomenal character

Witness-consciousness amounts to more, however, than just mode-neutral awareness of what is present in one’s conscious field at a time — it must carry with it an intrinsic phenomenal character. This character is needed to make it something phenomenally substantive in the mind and to properly distinguish it from functionally (but not phenomenally) equivalent conceptions of consciousness, such as ‘higher-order’ theories of consciousness or Dainton’s ‘pure awareness’. In this section, I investigate whether there is *prima facie* reality to mode-neutral awareness with intrinsic phenomenal character.

It is worth re-iterating what is unique to the phenomenal character of mode-neutral awareness, so that this distinguishing feature can be identified in an argument for its *prima facie* reality. Its phenomenal character, we can recall, will be *pre-attentional*, in that being intrinsic to the very act of attending or inattending, it will never become an object of either attention or inattention. The phenomenal character that befits mode-neutral awareness will thus be something that, qualifying the awareness itself, systematically eludes the possibility of capture and examination before the mind’s eye. It will therefore be of a different order to the phenomenal character of objects in our purview (such as trees, tables, sounds, thoughts), which can be the focus of attentive acts.

As an initial step in the argument, we can be reminded that various philosophers have not been content to describe conscious experience as being exhausted by the collection of objects to which one happens to be attending at a time. As mentioned from the outset, there seems, in addition to the stream of changing experiences, to be a background hum, which Chalmers has described as the ‘phenomenology of self’

and which Evans (1970) speaks of as a ‘lively sense of presence’. Now, it was established in the previous section that there is a *prima facie* principle of unity in the mind that seems ascribed to a supposed ‘me’ that the various experiences are for, befitting the description (we surmised) of mode-neutral awareness. Does the background hum seem, then, to belong to this very awareness that cognises the multiplicity of objects?

If so, the answer is not immediately obvious. For at least two other possibilities could conceivably explain the feeling of background hum, such that careful reflection may more obviously ‘source’ the hum in one of these alternative possibilities rather than in the mode-neutral awareness. First, the background hum could seem best attributed to none other than what Evans has called ‘unprojected consciousness’ — the stream of peripheral objects to which we are not attending at a given time. While it has already been argued that this background flow of objects does not appear to perform the function of attending to (or unifying) the focal objects (and so is a poor candidate for replacing entirely the role of subject), it could still, for all that, account for the *phenomenal* background to experience. Second, the background hum might, on careful reflection, seem best attributed to the invariant quality of for-me-ness — a feature that can be focused on at will, but which is normally peripheral to attention (or reflection). Both of these possibilities must be shown as manifestly implausible if mode-neutral awareness is to emerge as the most obvious apparent source of the background hum (which would be needed to give witness-consciousness *prima facie* reality).

So are either of these possibilities feasible? Taking Evan’s hypothesis first, it can be argued in its favour that conscious experience does seem to be divided, at the very least, into objects to which we are attending and those which we are not. For instance, as I write, an air-race is occurring. I now focus on the sound of the aeroplanes, and it does not seem as if the sound has suddenly appeared in my awareness — it has rather moved, it seems, from peripheral to focal awareness. Such observations are not new and they lend special support to Evans’s hypothesis when it is reflected that experience, if it is carved up at all, is generally *bifurcated* into the domains we call ‘subject’ and ‘object’. Evans’s hypothesis picks out two clear domains of experience: the attentive (focal) and the inattentive (marginal), which he thinks accounts most plausibly for our tendency to posit a subject/object division. If mode-neutral awareness had its own distinct phenomenology, however, then if we were loathe to deny the plausible attention/inattention split within experience, it seems we would have

to admit to a *fourfold* division of experience, so as to enable an additional distinction to be made between the character of witness-consciousness and the character of objects witnessed. There would be two sorts of background hum! But this is not how things seem, reflectively or pre-reflectively. Given that it is hard to deny the attention/inattention split within experience, it might seem that we should concede to Evans in supposing that the *single* background hum really does seem due to the flow of objects in peripheral attention rather than to anything more esoteric, such as witness-consciousness.

There is, however, a possibility that this misdescribes the character of experience, such that witness-consciousness may, after all, be kept in the picture. On this possibility, we allow for a fourfold divide of experience, but also insist that there would not be two background hums, only one: that seemingly attributed to witness-consciousness. Evans's flow of peripheral objects, although 'background' in some sense, will not seem background in the *right* sense, the way that has interested and puzzled philosophers, prompting the subject/object divide as phenomenally conceived. The right kind of background hum could only, on this picture, seem caused by the same principle that seems to unify the experiences to a single *subject* — that of mode-neutral awareness. To argue for this picture, it will be necessary to consider the other hypothesis for the background hum — for-me-ness.

Both Zahavi and Williford attribute the background presence to for-me-ness. For-me-ness (which Zahavi also refers to as 'mineness') seems a candidate for the background hum because it is qualitatively invariant and, while impinging on conscious experience, is usually below the threshold of focal awareness. As Zahavi puts it, 'The mineness is not something attended to; it simply figures as a subtle background presence. Nevertheless, the particular first-person givenness of the experience makes it mine and distinguishes it for me from whatever experiences others might have' (2005, p. 124). For-me-ness can, however, be voluntarily focused on in more detail, if we shift the focus of awareness, in Williford's terms, from the 'objects of the experience' to the 'experience of the objects' (2006, p. 123).

I think that insofar as the feeling of for-me-ness *can* be focused on, in its capacity as a relational feature belonging to the stream of experiences, it is wrongly placed to be the most obvious source of the background hum. The reason stems, I suggest, from the very persistence, in philosophy, of puzzles about an aspect of subjectivity that seems to systematically *evade* attentive focus. As Moore put it: 'the moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see what, distinctly, it is, it seems to vanish: it seems as if we had before us a mere

emptiness' (1903, p. 450). Consider also this passage by Roderick Chisholm:

The two great traditions of contemporary western philosophy — “phenomenology” and “logical analysis” — seem to meet, unfortunately, at the extremes. The point of contact is the thesis according to which one is never aware of a *subject* of experience [...when] as Hume put it, we enter most intimately into what we call ourselves. Thus Sartre seems to say that, although we may apprehend things that are *pour-soi*, things that are manifested or presented to the self, we cannot apprehend the self to which, or to whom, they are manifested — we cannot apprehend the self as it is in itself, as it is *en-soi*. And Russell has frequently said that the self or subject is not “empirically discoverable”; Carnap expressed what I take to be the same view by saying that “the given is subjectless” (1969, p. 94).

Various philosophers such as Ryle (1966), and indeed Chisholm himself,¹² have denied that anything metaphysically mysterious lurks in the supposed subject of experience. As we saw earlier, Ryle holds that the supposed subject’s elusive character is no more mysterious than the fact that one can never jump on the head of one’s own shadow, or that a human eye can never directly see itself. We are mistaken if we suppose that there is more to ‘the elusive subject’ than this.

Even if Ryle is correct here, the very fact that the elusive subject (and not shadow-jumping!) has been so persistently singled out as puzzling demands explanation. When the subject keeps failing to be discovered in experience by traditional empirical methods — methods tailor-made to discovering attendable *objects* — then why do philosophers continue to ponder over it? Why don’t they simply treat the subject like all the other innocuously elusive phenomena? I think that the puzzle persists precisely because there seems to be a *sui generis phenomenal* component to the subject of experience, a *pre-attentional* aspect that resists all attempts at being focused upon. If the background hum seemed to be completely accounted for by the attendable (or reflective) aspect of for-me-ness, then I doubt that the puzzle would have persisted in the way that it has done. We should expect that every time we attend to our experience of objects (as opposed to the object of our experiences), the normally elusive aspect becomes more salient, making it less mysterious as its details are brought to the fore. But this does not happen; the phenomenal character of the hum remains as elusive, whether we are attending to objects or to experiences.

[12] Chisholm (1969, p. 95) thinks that ‘both groups have lost their way’ in supposing there to be a genuine problem here.

While I have so far emphasised the focal aspect of for-me-ness, I do think that a systematically elusive aspect *is* built into the impression of for-me-ness. It resides not in the focusable feeling of for-me-ness itself, but in the sense of a projected *me* that the experiences are for (or the supposed *self* in what Zahavi terms ‘built-in self-reference’).¹³ We may recall from the previous section that it was the *me* of the for-me-ness that seemed to account for the unifying conscious principle that could be cognisant of multiple experiences at any one time. This amounted, functionally, to mode-neutral awareness. What I am now suggesting is that this apparent principle of unity in the stream of experience — mode-neutral awareness — is not merely functional. It also seems to have a pre-attentional intrinsic phenomenal character, such that it best accounts for why elusiveness of the *subject* (as opposed to anything else) has been so persistently puzzling.

Direct consideration of the unity puzzle supports this line of thought. The unity of consciousness is framed as a puzzle that arises from reflection upon the nature of experience as pre-theoretically presented. We seem to be aware, as Bayne and Chalmers put it, of ‘a singularity behind the multiplicity’ (2003, p. 27). Our awareness of this singularity does not appear to be something that we merely deduce from thinking *about* experience; it seems to arise directly from *within* experience, which suggests that it carries — or seems to carry — an intrinsic phenomenal character. The source of the phenomenal unity has never been found through the traditional object-finding avenues (the usual routes to discovering any aspects of experience), which lends credence to the idea of its seeming systematically elusive to focal awareness, and hence pre-attentional in the manner distinctive to witness-consciousness.

Having argued that the appearance of witness-consciousness (implicit in for-me-ness), seems to best account for background hum, we can now dismiss Evans’s ever-shifting background of unattended objects as being suitably qualified to fill that role. Recall the possibility that was left open — that of allowing a fourfold divide of experience (witness-consciousness versus object-experience, and attended versus unattended phenomena) but only a single background hum — that of witness-consciousness. I have now provided the line of argument needed to show that, indeed, only witness-consciousness could seem background in the *right* sense — the sense that aligns it with the main subject of the subject/object divide. On this argument, the

[13] This aspect of for-me-ness is acknowledged by Zahavi who (following Husserl) holds that reflection will always retain an ‘unthematic and anonymous spot in the life of the subject’ (2005, p. 92).

appearance of witness-consciousness, with its pre-attentional sense of presence, most obviously accounts for the existence of those long-standing puzzles that revolve around the supposed *subject* of experience. Hence witness-consciousness can be said to have *prima facie* reality.

Part Three: The Reality of Witness-Consciousness

The *prima facie* reality of witness-consciousness does not imply its actual reality. As with voices in the head, witness-consciousness could turn out to be a pervasive illusion. In this final section, I present an argument for the conclusion that, in all likelihood, witness-consciousness is not illusory but real. This does not preclude the reality of for-me-ness, so long as it is understood that witness-consciousness metaphysically underpins the reality of for-me-ness rather than, as its advocates would claim, the other way around.

Arguing the case requires getting clearer on the ontology of an illusion. Any perceptual or cognitive illusion must involve a mismatch between appearance and reality. So an illusion occurs when something appears as if, in reality, it would be a certain way, when, in reality, it is not that way. With the famous Mueller-Lyer illusion, for example, two lines appear to be of uneven length, when in reality the lines are of even length; the appearance-reality mismatch creates the illusion.

Importantly, if an illusion such as this is to occur, a distinction must be made between what we may call the *vehicle of illusion* and the *content of illusion*. The content of an illusion is the state of affairs that is conveyed, via the appearance, as being real (e.g. the two lines being of uneven length). The vehicle of illusion is the event of the appearance itself (e.g. the event of the lines appearing as uneven). Given what has been argued so far, the appearance must be structured in such a manner that its content seems to present itself (in a particular way) to a first-person perspective, as opposed to seeming unowned. In terms of what lacks reality, it is the content that is ontologically bankrupt (the uneven lines), not the vehicle (the event of its appearing as such). Indeed, if there was no vehicle of illusion, then there would be no occurrences of illusory phenomena — no appearances of something as being a particular way, such that it turns out to mismatch reality.

My argument — or most of it — will run by proposing that a central aspect of witness-consciousness is implicated in the very *vehicle* of an illusion, such that this aspect cannot possibly be of illusory nature. This requires first being clear about the sense in which witness-

consciousness could be an illusion, and hence on how an appearance/reality distinction could feasibly arise for witness-consciousness.

In Part Two, it was argued that the feeling of for-me-ness in conscious life implies the appearance of witness-consciousness, the latter being associated with the *me* the experiences are *for*. If witness-consciousness is to have more than just *prima facie* reality, however, it must be genuinely independent of those experiences which point to it — just as it appears to be. In other words, there must really be an independent aspect of our conscious life, to which the experiences are directed, an aspect that is befitting to witness-consciousness (as *modus operandi* of a subject). Witness-consciousness cannot have independent reality if its appearance turns out to be generated by the experiences themselves, such that it is merely *as if* there were a separate principle of witnessing (or subject) to which the experiences are presented. But that is precisely the sort of view that both Zahavi and Williford endorse (with the ‘subject’ sometimes loosely referred to as a ‘self’). Zahavi writes:

In short ... the self, as an experiential dimension, does not exist in separation from the experiences, [it] is identified by the very first-personal givenness of the experiences (132). ... To be conscious of *oneself* ... is not to capture a pure self that exists in separation from the stream of consciousness, but rather entails just being conscious of an experience in its first-personal mode of givenness; it is a question of having first-personal access to one’s own experiential life. Thus, the self referred to is not something standing beyond or opposed to the stream of experiences but is rather a feature or function of its givenness (2005, p. 106).

Williford, identifying the for-me-ness (and hence, subjectivity) with an episode of consciousness representing itself, writes ‘On this view, the subject of consciousness is just the conscious episode itself ... We thus avoid the postulation of some sort of homunculus behind consciousness’ (2006, p. 121). Both of their positions reject any ontological basis to a separate subject of experience, preferring (in Zahavi’s terms) that we ‘replace the traditional phrase “subject of experience” with the phrase “subjectivity of experience”’ (2005, p. 126). So for all the talk of ‘first-personal givenness’, there is no *first person* to whom the stream is given, no *me* that the for-me-ness is for.¹⁴ There is just the stream of experience that generates the impression of a *me*.

[14] Or in Zahavi’s revisionary terms, the *me* (*qua* minimal self) is *nothing more* than the feeling of for-me-ness. It is interesting to note that ontologically speaking, Zahavi’s position is actually very similar to that of the no-self theorists that he pitches himself against: they all agree that there is no substantial self-entity to which the feeling of for-me-ness refers. The main difference is semantic: Zahavi wants to re-claim the term ‘self’ to label the

If their position is correct, then witness-consciousness, as *modus operandi* of a subject, standing in opposition to the stream of experiences, will be a pervasive illusion. The *prima facie* reality of being a separate witnessing subject of experience will be based not upon any actual subject of experience, but upon the stream of experience that is supposedly being witnessed. That is how a mismatch between appearance and reality could arise for witness-consciousness.

Can we determine whether witness-consciousness is illusory or not? As intimated, my strategy for attempting to establish the reality of witness-consciousness — or at least a central aspect of it — is to implicate this aspect in the very vehicle (or event) of an illusion. We saw that in order for there to be an illusion-event, there must be the appearance of certain content — content that turns out to misrepresent reality. If there is an appearance of content, then the appearance must be structured such that the content seems to occur to a first-person perspective (through whatever sensory or cognitive modality) — there can be no seemingly unowned appearances. This apparent occurring of content to a first-person perspective will involve an apparent apprehension of the content from that perspective. If a single such apprehension is to even *seem* capable of cognising, at any time, a modicum of complexity in the content (such as shapes and colours), then that supposed act of apprehension must be genuinely mode-neutral, so as to allow the content to seem unified to it. Unless the content seemed unified, there could be no possibility of *misleading* content, and so no possibility of an illusion-vehicle. But then it seems that the very act of apprehension, if it is to account for the appearance of unified content (needed for the generation of an illusion-vehicle), cannot itself be a mere appearance; it must be real. And the very act of apprehension, and hence the ontology of an illusion-vehicle, invokes mode-neutral awareness. It would appear, therefore, that mode-neutral awareness, central to witness-consciousness, is a necessary condition for the possibility of any illusion-vehicle — the part of the illusion that is *real*. Far from being identified with ontologically dubious illusory content, mode-neutral awareness is required for there to be any illusions at all.

Let us apply this argument more specifically to the case at hand. Witness-consciousness appears to be independent to the stream of experiences — it purports to have that kind of reality. If Zahavi and Williford are correct, then it does not actually have that kind of reality.

feeling of first-person givenness (an aspect of conscious life whose existence would not be denied by most no-self advocates). And lest there be confusion, witness-consciousness *is not* the same as the more substantial self whose existence is commonly denied (although it is a central aspect that is ascribed to such a self).

Suppose they are correct. Witness-consciousness is an illusion that is generated by those experiences to which it seems to stand in opposition. But the appearance of such content must, as we saw, seem to occur to a particular conscious perspective. This conscious perspective, we saw, will itself require mode-neutral awareness, if the illusory content is to appear unified (as it does). What happens when we suppose that mode-neutral awareness is itself the illusory content? We end up with a contradiction: if the content (mode-neutral awareness) is genuinely illusory, then the vehicle (mode-neutral awareness) is not real. But if the vehicle is not real, it cannot be carrying the illusory content. Hence: if mode-neutral awareness is illusory, it cannot be illusory. Avoiding a contradiction will require asserting the reality of mode-neutral awareness.

Having argued the case this far, however, we must be reminded that mode-neutral awareness, while central to witness-consciousness, is not by itself witness-consciousness. Does this argument also buy the actuality of its intrinsic phenomenal character, which has so far been argued to have *prima facie* reality? The answer, unfortunately, is 'no'. The illusion argument offers no free ride to this central aspect of witness-consciousness. It leaves open the possibility, for instance, that the background hum, whose seemingly elusive phenomenal character has puzzled generations of philosophers, is (contrary to appearances) actually caused by the flow of unattended objects, or by the invariant feeling of for-me-ness. Perhaps these phenomenal contributors work in concert with the genuinely elusive and mode-neutral awareness, creating the unshakable but mistaken impression of a background hum that is as elusive as the principle that unifies it. Or perhaps not. Finding an argument that directly settles the issue may not be easy.

There is a line of argument, however, which does not rely upon settling the issue in such a direct way. It appeals to the philosophical principle where, all things being metaphysically equal, we should prefer the scenario on which we can preserve the appearances, rather than having to tell a more complicated story about illusions. On the assumption that all things *are* metaphysically equal — that (in a given conscious state) mode-neutral awareness with intrinsic phenomenal character is not metaphysically stranger than mode-neutral awareness without it — we should favour the scenario that preserves the reality of witness-consciousness. If we are prepared to accept the reality of phenomenal consciousness in general, then I see no obvious reason to suppose that the assumption is an unreasonable one, and hence to suppose that the reality of witness-consciousness is not in line with how things appear. All consciousness, after all, seems metaphysically

strange, insofar as it does not seem to fit *obviously* into the physical world.

Conclusion

I began with a quotation from G.E. Moore about a notion of consciousness that he described as distinct, diaphanous, and hard to define. While systematically vanishing before attention, this type of consciousness, I believe, picks out something very important about the nature of mind. In this paper, I have tried to develop the notion along analytical lines: first, by defining it more clearly as ‘witness-consciousness’; then by arguing for its appearance in conscious life as having *prima facie* reality; and finally, by arguing for its reality proper. If the arguments in this paper are cogent, then it would seem that the project of explaining how consciousness fits into the world can no longer afford to ignore the reality of witness-consciousness. Witness-consciousness will be at least as real as the manifold of experience that it unifies. Its attentional elusiveness, however, may render the ‘hard problem’ to be more intractable than ever.

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