

**Swiss Philosophical Preprint Series**

**# 16**

**Olivier Massin**

**The Self-World Dualism  
and Neutral Monism**

added 10/11/2008

ISSN 1662-937X

© Olivier Massin

# Self-World Dualism and Neutral Monism

Olivier Massin, Pro\*Doc Seminar, Fribourg

November 3, 2008

## 1 Varieties of Self-World Dualism

*Self-World dualism (SWD)*: most subjects know (or seem to know) that there is a difference between themselves and the external world (i.e., the world that exists independently of their attitudes towards it).<sup>1</sup>

*Self-World dualism's question*: how do we get the knowledge (or apparent knowledge) that there is a distinction between us and the external world ?

Many different ways in which that question can be understood:

### 1.1 Realist, anti-realist and idealist readings of the SWD question

*realist*: the SWD question is not a question about the *existence* of the self and the external world. Taking both of them for granted, the question addresses the epistemological issue of how this distinction comes to be known by the subject.

*anti-realist*: the SWD is not a question about the existence of the self and of the external world. Neither of them exist. The SWD question is a question about the origin of a wrong belief or impression.

*idealist*: the SWD question is (also) a question about the very existence of the self, the world, or both. By distinguishing between self and world, we truly create a distinction that wasn't there before.

⇒ the realist reading shall be assumed here: there is a distinction between the subject and the external. The SWD question is only epistemological: how does the subject comes know that distinction.

### 1.2 Intuitionist vs. inferentialist reading of the SWD question

*inferentialist*: Our knowledge of the distinction between ourselves and the external world is reached by inference, e. g. inference to the best explanation, or inference to unsensed causes.

*intuitionist*: Our knowledge of the distinction between ourselves and the external world is reached by experience: we immediately experience or intuit such a distinction.

⇒ the intuitionist reading shall be assumed here.

---

<sup>1</sup>The locution comes from Russell (1995).

### 1.3 Internalist vs. externalist reading of the SWD question

*internalist*: how is that that, *from the point of view of the subject*, there is a difference between himself and the external world? How is that difference *subjectively accessed*?

*externalist*: how does the cognitive system of the subject represent and tracks the difference between himself and the external world? Is there a specific sub-system that reliably represents that difference? (even if it is not consciously accessed).

⇒ the internalist reading shall be assumed here. This doesn't preclude the truth of the externalist reading, internalism and externalism being here compatible and complementary (Baldwin 1991; 1995). Condillac (1997) proposes the thought experiment of a statue to which we add new senses progressively. He addresses the SWD question: he wants to determine when the statue will have an idea of the external world. He writes:

J'avertis donc qu'il est très important de se mettre exactement à la place de la statue que nous allons observer. Il faut commencer d'exister avec elle, n'avoir qu'un seul sens, quand elle n'en a qu'un ; n'acquérir que les idées qu'elle acquiert, ne contracter que les habitudes qu'elle contracte : en un mot, il faut n'être que ce qu'elle est (1997, p. 9)

### 1.4 Genetic vs. epistemic reading of the SWD question

*genetic*: the subject start without any conception of self-world dualism. The question is then to understand how he comes to access that distinction during his development.

*epistemic*: whether or not the knowledge of the distinction between self and world is innate, one can ask what justifies, presently, our belief in the external world.

⇒ the epistemic reading shall be assumed here. Two remarks though:

1. The piagetian program of the genetic reading has been subject to criticisms by recent developmental psychologists. They have empirically argue that the self-world distinction was innate (e.g. the feeling of the permanence of object). Russell(1995) gives the following answer: *coding* the distinction between self and world is not sufficient for having a reflective, *conscious* knowledge of that distinction. → one can be nativist in reponse to the externalist version of the SWD question, but constructionnist in response to the internalist version.
2. The two readings are compatible: it may be that the justifier of our belief in a distinction between ourselves and the world, is of the same kind than its origin. J.M. Baldwin (1906) introduced the expression "genetic epistemology".

## Summary

The SWD question we shall address is the following: assuming there is a distinction between the self and the world, how do we experience that distinction, from a first person perspective? This experience is not necessarily the one that gave birth to our belief in SWD, but it is in any event the experience we appeal to when asked to justify our belief in SWD.

## 2 From Self-World Dualism to phenomenological Neutral Monism

### 2.1 Two opposite answers to the SWD questions

Two main types of answers have been proposed to the SWD question, as here understood.

*primitive SWD*: the distinction between self and world is presented to the subject in the most basic type of intentional experiences (the ones that are necessary for other type of intentional experiences). It is not possible to have an intentional experience and to lack knowledge (or apparent knowledge) of SWD.

*derivative SWD*: the distinction between self and world is *not* presentend to the subject in the most basic types of intentional experiences. It is possible to have intentional experiences and to lack knowledge (or apparent knowledge) of SWD.

Upholders of the primitive SWD view typically insist that the self-world distinction is presented to us in ordinary perception. They endorse the perceptual view below. The most common version of the derivative SWD view on the other hand, has it that the self-world distinction is only presented in experiences which involved agency of the subject to some extent, such as the experience of resistance to our will. Call that the agentive view.

*perceptual view*: the distinction between self and world is present in every perception (or apparent perception)

*agentive view*: the distinction between self and world is presented only in experiences which involve agency of the subject, typically experiences of resistance to our will.

There is certainly some intuitive appeal to the agentive view (we empathize with Dr Johnston reaction to Berkeley), but it faces one main difficulty: it has to deny that ordinary perception present us with the reality of its objects, with the distinction between sujet and object. In what follows, I try to argue that there are good reasons to bite the bullet.

## 2.2 Two versions of the agentive view

Upholder of the agentive view disagree on the subjective nature of the basic intentional experiences, that we enjoy before getting knowledge of the SWD.

*egotist* the subject starts from self-knowledge (he knows himself) and then discovers there is something else than himself. The point of departure is solipsism.

- Following the Cartesian tradition, Condillac subscribes to the egotist version. In absence of any SWD knowledge, all the things perceived are identified by the subject to modification of himself. Seeing red is being red<sup>2</sup>. Phagocytic self.
- The egotist version is suggested when one speaks of the problem of *objectivity*: how can a subject which already knows himself gain the conception of an external world.

*neutralist* the subject starts from neutral knowledge, knowledge which is neutral relative to the self-world distinction. He has just neutral appearances.

- The idea that the first mode of knowledge (or apparent knowledge) is neutral is to be found among neutral monists (Mach, James, B. Russell, Carnap, although neutral monism is an ontological thesis rather than a phenomenological one), Scheler (1973, p. 294) speaks of “exatic knowledge”, and Cook Wilson describe it at follows:

---

<sup>2</sup>This remainstrue, according to Condillac, even when some qualities are presented continuously while other vary:

Si, supposant qu'elle [la statue] est continûment la même couleur, nous faisons succéder en elle les odeurs, les saveurs et les sons, elle se regarderait comme une couleur qui est successivement odoriférante, savoureuse et sonore. Elle se regarderait comme une odeur savoureuse, sonore et colorée, si elle était constamment la même odeur ; et il faut faire la même observation sur toutes les suppositions de cette espèce. Car c'est dans la manière d'être où elle se retrouve toujours, qu'elle doit sentir ce moi qui lui paraît le sujet de toutes les modifications dont elle est susceptible. (Condillac, 1997, p. 87)

« In our ordinary experiences and in the sciences, the thinker or observer loses himself in a manner in the particular object he is perceiving or the truth he is proving. That is what he is thinking about, and not about himself ; and, though knowledge and perception imply both the distinction of the thinker from the object and the active working of that distinction, we must not confuse this with the statement that the thinking subject in actualizing this distinction, thinks explicitly about himself, and his own activity, as distinct from the object. » (Cook Wilson, 1926, p. 79)

- we have to give up the Cartesian and Brentanian idea that mental acts are essentially conscious.
- the self is subjectively a contrastive idea. Knowledge of the self and knowledge of the world are mutually dependent. They arise together.
- One rationale for preferring the neutralist approach is that the self is elusive : “why should this kind of being, which is the most difficult of all to elucidate, serve as the starting point for ontology?” (Scheler against Heidegger). What is to be said about the self independently of its relation to the external world?

⇒ I shall assume the neutralist approach: basic intentional experiences are not phenomenologically intentional: the distinction between the act or self and the object is not presented in those experiences. But is that plausible at all ?

### 2.3 In defense of selfless perception

The claim to be defended may be called phenomenological neutral monism:

*phenomenological neutral monism about perception (or selfless perception)*: ordinary perception does not *intrinsically* present us with the distinction between itself and its objects, that is, with the fact that its objects exist (or seem to exist) independently of the perceptual act.

This is *not* to say;

- that perception presents us with the fact that its object depends on us (such as in pain experience).
- that perception does not extrinsically present us with the fact that its objects exist indepently of our perception of them. Perceptual experience is usually an abstraction from a more general and somehow unitary experience which involves also memories, beliefs, desires, expectations, actions tendencies... (one may usefully distinguish thin from thick experience: the claim is only that phenomenological neutral monism is true of the thin experience).
- that perception does not present us with the fact that (in some cases at least) its object are external to us in a spatial sense. The only felt externality that is denied is externality in the sense of independance. Feeling *O* as distant from a point of view, does not imply feeling it as existing independently from that point, nor feeling that point as a constituent or place of *me*.

Even with those qualifications in mind, the idea of selfless perception may still sound odd to many philosophers. One further rationale in its favour is that it almost naturally follows from a far less controversial claim about perception, often called (strong) *intentionalism* or *transparency*: perception is phenomenologically transparent. The phenomenology of perception amounts to the phenomenology of its object or content. The argument for phenomenological neutral monism about perception goes then as follows:

1. In order to experience a relation as such, it is necessary to experience its *relata*.

2. Independence from perception is a relation between the perceptual act and its object.  
∴ In order to experience the fact the perceptual object exists independently of the perceptual act, it is necessary to experience both the perceptual act and its object.
3. In ordinary perceptual experience, perceptual acts are phenomenally transparent.  
∴ In ordinary perception, one does not experience the independence of the perceptual object from one's perception; i.e., the object is not presented as distinct from the act.

## Conclusion

To recap, there are three rationale in favour of phenomenological neutral monism about perception (i) properly understood, that thesis is not so radical (ii) it is a natural consequence of strong intentionalism about perception (iii) it nicely fits with the intuition that agency plays an essential role in our knowledge of the SWD. On interesting upshot is that if this is true, the phenomenal self is essentially contrastive and agentive.

## References

- J. Baldwin, "Thoughts and things or genetic logic (vol. 1-3)," *London: Swann Sonnenschein and Co*, 1906.
- T. Baldwin, "Two types of naturalism," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 80, pp. 171–199, 1991.
- , "Objectivity, causality and agency," *The Body and the Self*, pp. 107–125, 1995.
- Condillac, *Traité des sensations, traité sur les animaux, 1754*. Fayard, 1997.
- J. Cook Wilson, "Statement and inference, vols. i-II," 1926.
- J. Russell, "At two with nature: agency and the development of self-world dualism," *The body and the self*, pp. 127–152, 1995.
- M. Scheler, *Selected Philosophical Essays*. Northwestern University Press, 1973.