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Self-Experience

Abstract: *Hume famously denied that he could experience the self. Most subsequent philosophers have concurred with this finding. I argue that if the subject is to function as a bearer of experience it must (1) lack sensory qualities in itself to be compatible with bearing sensory qualities and (2) be single so that it can unify experience. I use Douglas Harding's first-person experiments to investigate the visual gap where one cannot see one's own head. I argue that this open space conforms to the above criteria and hence is consistent with being the subject. I respond to the objection that this location is merely a lack of visual experience. I argue that this space also encompasses sound and touch properties and hence functions as a bearer for other sensory modalities. These first-person findings provide prima facie support for the view that the subject is a thin bearer of experience.*

1. Introduction

What Am I? One may recognize the puzzle by asking: who or what is currently aware of the objects before me? I am aware of this computer screen, I am aware of my hands, I am aware of my body, I am aware of my thoughts and emotions. These are all objects of awareness (objects in a broad sense), and hence (phenomenally speaking) are not the 'I' that is presently aware of them (Albahari, 2006, pp. 7–12; Bond, 2005; Deikman, 1996; Edey, 1997). What is this experiencer?

Methods for answering the question of what I am divide roughly into three approaches: third-person, first-person, and rational. The

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third-person approach has been used to provide answers such as I am the organism (Olson, 1997; 2003; Snowdon, 1990; 2014), the brain, or brain parts (Hudson, 2001; Parfit, 2012; Puccetti, 1973).

The first-person approach takes phenomenal experience as the starting point (Albahari, 2009; Edey, 1997; Evans, 1970; Dainton and Bayne, 2005; Deikman, 1996; Harding, 1961/1986; Strawson, 2009; Zahavi, 2005). Answers from this approach have included for-me-ness (Zahavi, 2005), and the subject is a bundle of experiences (apparently endorsed by Hume).² In Eastern and meditative traditions the subject is pure awareness (Albahari, 2009; Deikman, 1996; Forman, 1999; Gupta, 1998; Shear, 1998), and has been described as being silent, still, and empty (Forman, 1999; Harding, 1961/1986; Shear, 1998; Shear and Jevning, 1999), while others drawing upon Indian Buddhist philosophy hold that there is no self at all (Dreyfus, 2011; Krueger, 2011; MacKenzie, 2008; Rahula, 2007; Siderits, 2011).

The rational approach, based upon reasoning (e.g. deductive and analogical reasoning), is the kind that was taken by Descartes and Leibniz in arguing for a substance view of the self. Their approach prioritized *a priori* deduction, though also drew upon the first-person perspective (see Swinburne, 1984, for a contemporary defence of substance dualism). The view that the self is created by brain processes or is a representational state (Churchland, 2002, chapter 3; Damasio, 1994, pp. 236–44) is a form of analogical reasoning, usually based upon the computer metaphor of the mind, combined with the third-person approach. The third-person perspective, in conjunction with analogical reasoning, has also been used to motivate the view that the self is an illusion produced by neural processes (Dennett, 1991; Metzinger, 2004).

Here I will be using a combination of the first-person approach and the rational approach, but with an emphasis on first-person experience. In particular, I will be using a first-person experimental

² Hume (1888/1978, p. 252): ‘I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.’ Given Hume’s empiricism, a question is whether Hume was making a metaphysical statement about the self or merely a statement about what is epistemically accessible while remaining neutral on metaphysics.

approach developed by Douglas Harding.³ Ultimately, we want all three routes to converge, but I set aside the third-person route here.

An objection to the first-person approach is the denial that phenomenology entails metaphysics. Just because things seem a certain way it does not follow that they are that way. However, there are reasons for holding that phenomenal experience does provide a guide to metaphysics when it comes to the subject. In fact, it is indispensable. As 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. Metaphysics is downstream of phenomenal experience. To ignore phenomenology in investigating the nature of the subject is like doing physics by analysing common-sense concepts of the physical — an entirely fruitless endeavour if you are interested in the way things actually are. The same reasoning applies to the subject of experience. How can I decide what I am if I am not even sure what it is like to be me?

A first-person approach to the self, like any empirical approach, does not need to establish a necessary connection between experience and metaphysics. Rather, all that is needed is that it provides *prima facie* justification for the metaphysical thesis. It may still turn out that there is no self, the phenomenal facts may be undermined by further evidence, but there will at least be *prima facie* justification for holding that the self exists.⁴

The first-person route reached a road block with David Hume when he proclaimed that he could find nothing in experience that corresponded to a self. Introspecting his 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

³ Douglas Harding was a British philosopher and mystic. His main occupation was as an architect, although he also taught comparative religion at Cambridge. Though he wrote many books, his philosophy was developed almost exclusively outside of academia and is virtually unknown by philosophers. As far as I know, the only place his writings can be found in mainstream philosophy is in *The Minds I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul* (Hofstadter and Dennett, 1981) which presents excerpts from Harding (1961/1986). His main work in philosophy was *The Hierarchy of Heaven and Earth* (Harding, 1952/2011). His first-person experiments do not seem to have appeared in detail in any academic contexts.

⁴ For defences of the *prima facie* justification supplied by experience see: Goldman (2004), Pryor (2000), Siewert (1998, chapter 1 and 2), Velmans (2007).

at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said to not exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death, and could I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is farther requisite to make me a perfect non-entity. 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, 1888/1978, 1.4.6, p. 152)

Hume was not searching for just any phenomena in experience. He was looking for one that could play a very specific function of unifying all of my experiences both synchronically (at one moment) and diachronically (over time).

Hume's failure to find a subject has been re-confirmed by most philosophers since.⁵ A salient example is Bertrand Russell who concurred with Hume that 'we can easily become aware of our own experiences, but we seem to never become aware of the subject itself' (Russell, 1914, p. 439). Contrary to Hume, I will argue that the subject can be experienced; that is, there can be a self-experience,⁶ with the assistance of appropriate methods. If successful, given the long history of philosophers who agree with Hume's phenomenological findings, this would be a significant result.

The main aim of the paper is identifying a phenomenal candidate for the subject of experience. My claim is that this candidate meets the criteria for being a thin bearer of experience. A thin bearer of experience cannot exist without experiences (see Strawson, 2009, pp. 323–60, on 'thin subjects'). This distinguishes it from thick bearers such as a face which can bear a grin but continues to exist without the grin (Armstrong, 1968/1992, p. 23). A thin bearer of experience is contrasted with thick bearers such as bodies and brains; however, this should not be read as implying that this type of subject is necessarily

⁵ Recent examples are: Dainton (2000, pp. 6, 57, 94), Giles (1993), Peacocke (2014, pp. 44–57), Prinz (2012), Shoemaker (1987).

⁶ By 'self-experience' I mean an experience of the self. However, I use the term 'self-experience' to avoid connotations that in experiencing myself I necessarily experience myself as an object *of* awareness. I am influenced here by Galen Strawson (2009, pp. 176–7).

disembodied, non-physical, or an immaterial substance (see the concluding comments).

Rather than argue for the necessary existence of the subject, the aim is to provide *prima facie* support for the reality of the subject. In particular, the argument is an inference to the best explanation. The convergence of rational considerations and phenomenological evidence provides a reason for accepting the *prima facie* reality of the subject.

The main focus will be on the visual modality. Hume's claim that I cannot experience myself applies to all modalities, so finding a candidate self-experience using vision would be sufficient to negate this finding. I begin with the question of whether the looker can be visually experienced. Is there a bearer of visual experience?

I extend the discussion to other sensory modalities in Section 6. I will also be focusing on the synchronic properties of the subject (that is, its unity at a single moment), rather than its diachronic properties (that is, its continuity over time).

The outline for the paper is as follows: in Section 2, I use arguments to infer the characteristics required for a minimal subject of experience, and hence provide criteria for a self-experience. In Section 3, I make some preliminary phenomenological observations. In Section 4, I use first-person experiments from Douglas Harding to show that there is a target of experience which fits the criteria for being the bearer of experience. In Section 5, I discuss how this experience differs from that of pure blind spots and gaps. I discuss other sensory modalities in Section 6. I respond to assorted objections in Section 7. I make some concluding comments in Section 8.

2. Characteristics of the Subject

To know what could count as a self-experience it is helpful to know what to look for. What properties must the subject of experience have in itself? Harding proposes that 'to take on the shape of the hand that's holding this book, you have to be free of shape; to take on its colour you have to be colourless; and to take on its opacity you have to be transparent; and to take on its complexity you have to be perfectly plain and clear' (Harding, 1990/1999, pp. 51–2). If a subject is to be present with all experiences, that which takes them on, then it must be compatible with them. For example, if the phenomenal subject was coloured or shaped this would be incompatible with it taking on colours and shapes. If the subject was a red screen on which sensory

experience was projected then everything would be tinted red (Shear, 1998). The subject must, in itself, be colourless, silent, tasteless, feelingless, and so forth.⁷ I understand ‘take on’ to mean subsume something ontologically, that is, to include something within itself as a part or property (see Bayne and Chalmers, 2003). I use ‘subsume’ and ‘bear’ interchangeably.

Another essential property of the subject, if it exists, is that it is single. A trivial sense of singularity of the subject comes from the way we use the term ‘subject’. It refers to a single being that has experiences. A more substantial sense of subject singularity comes from the close connection between being a single subject and the unity of consciousness.⁸ I see the blueness of the sky, hear the birds chirp, and feel the warmth of the sun simultaneously. It is plausible that an explanation for the unity of consciousness will also explain the singularity of the experiencer and vice versa. This makes sense particularly if we understand the subject as being the bearer of experience. I would go further and say that phenomenally speaking experience is unified (synchronically and diachronically) because things, sounds, thoughts, and feelings are all presented to me. As Nida-Rümelin puts it: ‘The stream of consciousness is the totality of what is phenomenally given... to a subject in perception, emotion, bodily feeling, memory, imagination and thought, a totality which is in permanent change from moment to moment’ (Nida-Rümelin, 2014, p. 271). There are then *a priori* grounds for considering the subject single merely by the way the concept is used. There are also experiential grounds based upon the unity of consciousness, which also strongly suggest that the subject is necessarily single.

⁷ An anonymous reviewer asked: ‘What rules out *a priori* the idea that the subject might have phenomenal properties so pervasive, like the background hum of air conditioning, that we simply don’t register them?’ I find it hard to believe that I could experience sensory phenomenal properties that are impossible for me to notice. What would distinguish them from unconscious states? Presumably unattended sounds have a sensory phenomenal character, and so they contribute to overall experience. This means that they can interfere with other sounds, perhaps only very subtly (or perhaps only with other unattended sounds). The important point is that, whether we notice them or not, if any sensory phenomenal properties were built into the subject itself then it would interfere with the subject functioning as a bearer for sensory phenomenal character within that modality.

⁸ For definitions of the unity of consciousness, see Bayne (2010), Bayne and Chalmers (2003), Brook and Raymond (2014), Cleeremans (2003), Dainton (2000), and Tye (2003).

The above reasoning provides criteria for deciding whether an experience counts as a self-experience. In particular, to count as an experience of the bearer of experience the target should *seemingly* (1) have no sensory qualities and (2) be singular. The goal of experiments 1–5 will be to show that there is an experience in the visual modality conforming to the above characteristics.

3. Preliminary Phenomenological Observations

I begin with some preliminary phenomenological observations that we will be further exploring with first-person experiments. Can the subject be visually experienced? Not so according to Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*:

5.632 The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world.

5.633 Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be found? You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field. But really you do not see the eye. And nothing in the visual field allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye. (Wittgenstein, 1922, pp. 74–5)

The subject cannot be found in the visual field. It cannot be experienced as an object of vision, but he proposes that it is like its limits. This is suggestive as to where we might begin to look. Douglas Harding proposes that, instead of attending off to one side of the visual field, I should attend to the point I am apparently looking from.

The breakthrough for Harding in terms of self-experience occurred when he came across a picture drawn by Ernst Mach (Figure 1). The image depicts Mach's first-person self-portrait with one eye closed. In the background it shows a wall and a window, wooden floorboards, and shelves of books along the wall. In the middle ground can be seen Ernst Mach's body, in particular, his shoes, wrinkled pants, waistcoat, and arms, and right hand holding a pencil. In the foreground, on the right can be seen a large nose blur and handlebar moustache, and at the top an eyebrow. At the edges the image fades out.

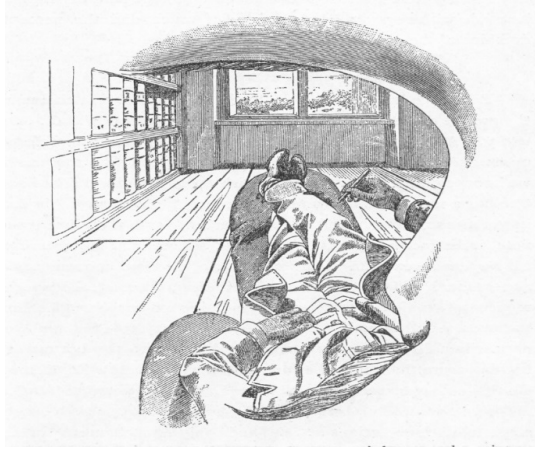


Figure 1. Ernst Mach's first-person self-portrait (Mach, 1890, p. 59).

This first-person portrait is so striking because it provides a depiction of what it is like to be me that is very different from how I appear to others. Most salient is the lack of a head in the picture. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, p. 108) has also pointed out this obvious fact: 'In the matter of living appearance, my visual body includes a large gap at the level of the head.'

Take some time to investigate it for yourself. Look down at your body. I find that my legs, torso, and arms are given visually, but that my head is not. There is nothing visually above my shoulders. Actually my back is also visually absent and the rest of my body often disappears from the scene, and one wall of the room is presently visually missing. Harding describes his vivid version of this experience in the setting of the Himalayas:

What actually happened was something absurdly simple and unspectacular: just for the moment I stopped thinking. Reason and imagination and all mental chatter died down. For once words really failed me. I forgot my name, my humanness, my thingness, all that could be called me or mine. Past and future dropped away. It was as if I had been born that instant, brand new, mindless, innocent of all memories. There existed only the Now, that present moment and what was clearly given in it. To look was enough. And what I found was khaki trouser legs terminating downwards in a pair of brown shoes, khaki sleeves terminating sideways in a pair of pink hands, and a khaki shirtfront terminating upwards in — absolutely nothing whatever! Certainly not in a head. It took me no time at all to realise that this nothing, this hole where a head should have been, was no ordinary vacancy, no mere nothing. On the

contrary, it was very much occupied. It was a vast emptiness vastly filled, a nothing that found room for everything — room for grass, trees, shadowy distant hills, and far above them snow peaks like a row of angular clouds riding the blue sky. I had lost a head and gained a world. (Harding, 1961/1986, pp. 1–2)

It is important to point out here that this is an exercise in phenomenological description. This is not a claim about myself as a human being. Of course, ‘I’ (in the human personal sense) have a head. I also see my face in a mirror. Knowing what I look like to others is central to my identity as a person. However, I am enquiring here into my identity as experiencer. What I find when I look in the mirror is that the face is over there in the glass about a metre away, not here on my shoulders (of my experienced body). It is also facing the wrong direction.

Some will object that they can see their nose. But what kind of nose does it seem to be? I find that it seems to be a large pink translucent blur that stretches from the top to the bottom of the scene. It is continually appearing and disappearing. In fact there seem to be two of them. They tend to appear one at a time on opposite sides of the scene. What are these blurs apparently attached to on present evidence? Again I seemingly find nothing, or a gap. There are also various aches, tickles, and other such facial sensations and proprioception of ‘head’ position. Where are these occurring in present experience? Do they seem to be occurring on the surface of, or qualifying, an opaque spherical object with eyes, mouth, hair, and ears?

4. First-Person Experiments

4.1. Methodology

The following are a series of first-person experiments. They are not thought experiments, but an investigation of your first-person experience as it is given. If they are not carried out then this paper will not make any sense. It is integral that during the following awareness exercises you go by how things seem rather than how you think or imagine they are. That is, at least for the moment, you attempt to describe your experience exactly as it is given. There is nothing mysterious about taking on this ‘phenomenal attitude’. An example is when I describe the lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion as seeming to be unequal in length even though I believe that they are actually equal in length.

Harding's procedure also uses a method of phenomenal contrast. Here two phenomena are compared so as to make salient the phenomenal difference between them. Such a first-person method is also advocated by Susanna Siegel (2007). The goal of the experiments is to use apparatus (such as hands) as an aid for making a contrast between viewed objects and the apparent viewer of those objects, in particular for setting up the phenomena that are to be contrasted, and for orienting attention to the target phenomenon.⁹

4.2. *The Experiments*

Experiment 1: Exploring the Gap

Hold up your hands in front of you as if you were holding a basketball. Now slowly bring them towards yourself, past your ears. Notice how your hands seem to grow larger (in the sense of taking up more of the visual field), and the gap between them also grows. They begin to blur and finally disappear altogether into an apparent void here. 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.¹⁰

Experiment 2: Tracing Out the Field of View

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 edge of the visual field. I find that the gap is seemingly as large as the scene. This SPACE¹¹ seemingly encompasses the room from wall to wall. Also notice that the visual field 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. Again trace out the boundaries of this visual field. Does it have a visibly

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ See Harding (1996, p. 5) for a version of this experiment.

¹¹ By 'space' I do not mean the space of physics, but rather I use it as a descriptive term in the sense of a gap or opening, and also in terms of it seemingly functioning as room or capacity (in a container sense) for the scene. From here on, 'space' will appear in small caps when I am using it in this special sense of the term.

discernible surrounding environment? Or does it visually have nothing outside of it?¹² Finally, is there one gap or multiple gaps? I only find one. That is, it is phenomenally singular.

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 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 a 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). 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 is phenomenally identical to that of the finger-frame, except that unlike the gap in the finger-frame it has no discernible boundaries.¹³

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 — ??? From your present experience, is your finger pointing at an object, a thing? Does there seem to be a head or face here? Continue pointing and please go

¹² Thank you to Richard Lang for introducing this experiment to me.

¹³ 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 (1990/1999, pp. 114–6).

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?¹⁴

4.3. Overview of Results

The goal of the experiments was to bring attention back to what it is like to be the looker 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 experiment were in complete contrast to common sense. What I found was:

1. This spot seems to be lacking in colours, and shapes. The experience is as of transparency rather than opaqueness.
2. There seems to be one gap here. It seems single.
3. The SPACE here seemingly encompasses or is full of the scene.
4. The field of view does not seem to be in anything.
5. When I point here I seem to be pointing at myself, or at least the looker.

When I attend to where I am apparently looking from, I find no visual features. Recall that lack of colour, shape, etc. is exactly what was predicted to be a defining characteristic (or lack of characteristic) of the minimal subject. It is also seemingly single. There is only one gap. This was the second predicted characteristic of the subject. The target of experience fits the criteria of the bearer of experience as outlined in Section 2. This was an experience in which the target *seemingly* (1) has no sensory qualities, and (2) is singular. These were characteristics which were inferred to be required for the target to function as the bearer of experience.

I also seem to be looking from here. There is a sense that I am here (a sense of self). This provides another motivation for holding that this open SPACE is me. The SPACE also apparently encompasses the visual scene which is consistent with it being the bearer of visual experience.

¹⁴ 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 (1990/1999, pp. 8–9, 41–2; 2000, pp. 8–9), Lang (2003, pp. 7–8).

So far, however, all that follows is that this is a bearer of visual experience, not necessarily the bearer of experience. I investigate other sensory modalities in Section 6.

5. Blind Spots and Gaps

According to common sense there is nothing special about this spot, it is just a visual blind spot. My eyes do not look backwards, so of course there is nothing to see HERE.¹⁵ 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, a visual blank. It is natural then to explain this phenomenon as merely a pure visual absence.

There is something right about calling THIS a visual absence, 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*. There is also a visual blind spot where the optic nerve passes through the retina. The blind location is filled in by the other eye so that we do not typically notice the loss of information. It is important to note that these types of visual absences are not seen as nothing but have a sensory phenomenal character. Even the nothingness of outer space appears black and not as a pure absence. This gap is not like this, nor like any other direction. Neither is it a ‘perception of absence’ of an expected object, such as when I see the absence of my laptop on the desk when it has been stolen (Farennikova, 2013). Other types of absences are holes and gaps. For example, I experience the gap where something is missing, and there is a character of emptiness to the experience. These are *blind spots by vacancy*. Finally, there is a blind spot where there is a complete lack of experience altogether. This type of absence has no phenomenal character — it is a *pure blind spot*. Is there a complete lack of visual experience when you attend to the location from which you are looking? We can answer this question by contrasting what it is like to attend to this location with what it is like to attend outside of your visual field on the horizontal axis (i.e. in the left and right directions).

¹⁵ Throughout the remainder of the text, when I use ‘here’ and ‘this’ in small caps the reader should assume that I am referring to the visual gap from which one seems to be looking.

Experiment 5: Pure Blind Spots, Absences, and the Aware Spot

- (A) *Blind Spot by Vacancy*: Look directly ahead and move your hand slowly to the left. Notice that your hand begins to look blurry and eventually visibly 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. If I merely experience nothing from where I am looking, if it is an absolute absence of experience, then what it is like to attend HERE should be exactly the same as there. Point off to the side and attend to that location. I find that I am pointing at nothing whatsoever, no things, no colours, no shapes. This is as close to a bare nothing as I can find. The visual field just ends. Now by contrast point HERE. There is a tangible phenomenal difference between the two spots. I am again apparently pointing at no thing, colour, or shape, but there is also an experience of spacious emptiness. It is like a hole. There is something it is like to experience this location.
- (B) *The Aware Spot*: Point to the gap formed by an open doorway. In a sense I am pointing at nothing. I seem to be pointing at no shapes or colours and not at the looker. Now point HERE. There is a phenomenal difference between the gap of the door way and HERE. Again there are apparently no shapes and colours, but I also seem to be pointing at the looker. THIS does not merely seem to be a gap. I am seemingly pointing at where I am looking from, the locus of awareness. A gap in a doorway has a spacious emptiness to it *simpliciter*. By contrast, when I attend HERE there is simultaneously (1) a spacious emptiness and (2) a sense that I am here/looking from here. It is an ‘Aware-Space’ (Harding, 1996, p. 83; 1988/2001, p. 135).

This spot can certainly be categorized as a type of visual absence in that it lacks colours and shapes. However, as there is a character of emptiness when I attend HERE, this is not an absence of experience. Is it merely a gap in the visual field? Most gaps are defined by boundaries *in* the visual field. For example, the gap in a doorway is defined by a door frame. This ‘gap’ is special, however, in that it has no frame. There is nothing apparently outside of it. Unlike other gaps it cannot be destroyed by changing the environment such as when I close an open door. Rather than being in the visual field, it encompasses the entire visual field. It is also experienceable at all times. I can experience it even with my eyes closed. Furthermore, it encompasses all other perceived gaps. If it is a gap it seems to be the

Ur-gap. If what I argue here is correct, it is the bearer of visual space and so all other gaps depend upon it.

This SPACE also has positive properties. It is not seemingly a mere gap or mere absence. As already mentioned this space seems to encompass the scene. Also importantly, I seem to be looking from here. There is a sense of self-presence. I seem to be a capacity for the scene. I conclude then that THIS is not a pure visual absence but rather is the best candidate for myself that I can find.¹⁶

Harding refers to THIS location as a ‘visibly boundless Space’ (Harding, 1988/2001, p. 109). I read ‘visibly’ as saying that there is something it is like to experience it. In particular, there is a character of emptiness to the experience. This is an important finding. As Dainton points out, phenomenal character need not be exhausted by sensory qualities such as visual, auditory, and tactile properties:

The notion of phenomenal character need not be restricted to qualities of this sort. A consciousness which consists of nothing but a *feeling* of void-like emptiness has a definite (if difficult to describe) phenomenal character. An ‘awareness’ of this kind is tangible rather than pure, even if it is natural to describe it as ‘pure’. By contrast, a truly bare Awareness has absolutely no phenomenal character of any kind, and so is subjectively indistinguishable from non-existence. (Dainton, 2002, pp. 45–6)

This reasoning about awareness also applies to the subject. If there is nothing it is like to experience myself apart from the properties of sensory qualities, then Hume is correct that a unique self-experience does not exist. If, however, there is a unique phenomenal character involved in apprehending myself, then self-experience is indeed possible. The subject can then make a phenomenal difference. I found that this was indeed the case.

6. Other Sensory Modalities

Experiments 1–5 investigated what it is like to be the looker using the visual modality. The looker seemed to be a space-for-the-visual-scene. Does this result generalize to the experiencer? The experiencer does not just see, but also hears, smells, feels, etc. Suppose someone

¹⁶ See Lewis and Lewis (1970) on the metaphysics of holes. Sorenson (2007) theorizes that the self is a kind of absence and touches on many points that I discuss here. I differ from Sorenson in emphasizing the affinities between this ‘absence’ and substance theories of the self.

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 the subject of experience. Certainly the gap here is experienced visually (as a lack of colours and shapes), but is it merely encompassing the visual scene?

As an initial observation, I do not just experience the coffee cup that I pick up as white, and cup-shaped, but as feeling hard and warm, and that felt hardness and warmth is out there with the cup — perfectly integrated with the visual features. I find that this SPACE seems to encompass not just visually experienced properties and objects but that it includes properties from other sensory modalities. Consider also when someone speaks, the sound is not just an additional element, but is heard as coming from their mouth. I do not experience a separate field of sound layered on top of the visual field. Certainly I do not always hear sounds at the same time as visually experiencing a scene (for example when I hear things behind me), but this does not show that there are separable fields, only that some of the contents of the single multimodal phenomenal field can occur without others. We will investigate this further in the next experiment.

Experiment 6: Eyes Closed

Close your eyes. Attend to your bodily sensations. Now attend to one of your hands. Going by present experience, how many fingers does it have? Can you feel five 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 a 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 thoughts and sounds are arising in the silence. Attend to your thoughts. Count in your

mind. Is there a boundary between your thoughts and the sounds of the room? Are these thoughts happening in a box (a head)? 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 once again flooded with colours and shapes.

In this experiment I found that my thoughts, bodily sensations, and the sounds all occur in a single awareness. The visual, bodily, and auditory elements are unified in a single experiential field.¹⁷

Although vision is the most salient means of access, I find that the field-like experience of myself is not limited to the visual modality. There is also a silence in which thoughts and sounds arise. The experience of emptiness is not limited to the visual modality. This void-like character of self-experience has been reported on many occasions within meditative traditions. As an example, describing the character of emptiness from the auditory modality Robert Forman states:

From that moment forward, I was silent inside. I don't mean I didn't think, but rather that the feeling inside of being me was like being entirely empty, a perfect vacuum. Since that time all of my thinking, my sensations, my emotions, etc., has been on a silent background. (Forman, 1999, p. 142)

It seems fair to say that the silence seems to be associated with that which is aware. I can say that unhesitatingly about my own experience. What is aware is precisely the silence. (*ibid.*, pp. 150–1)

A lot more can be said about other sensory modalities. However, my preliminary conclusion is that this SPACE also functions as a bearer of other sensory properties, and hence meets the criteria for being the bearer of experience. The character of emptiness in experiencing myself is also available in other sensory modalities, particularly as a background silence.

7. Assorted Objections

Perhaps the phenomenological evidence can be explained away. For example, one may hold that this experience is merely of a visual gap that has nothing to do with the subject, and that the sense of self-

¹⁷ See Tye (2003) on the single experience view in which there is only one single multi-modal phenomenal field from which we abstract out fields of different modalities. On this view the question of whether there are different bearers for each sensory modality would not even arise.

presence is merely co-located with the gap. It may be an unfortunate outcome of the procedure of this paper that it gives the impression that there are separable components of 'spaciousness' and 'self-presence'. The problem with language is that it artificially isolates components such as shape and colour which are in fact experienced inseparably. Similarly, the basic pre-theoretical, non-verbal present experience is I-am-space-for-the-scene-thoughts-sounds (etc.). This self-experience is a single indivisible unity. I suggest that it is like the sky seeming to be blue. The blueness does not seem to be merely co-located with the sky — it seems to *be* blue. Similarly, this open SPACE seems to *be* me. Hence I do not think that such attempts at reduction can do justice to the phenomenology.

An objection from photography is that a photograph of a cityscape also has a viewpoint and the paper also encompasses the image. We do not think that a photo is a subject, so why think that these properties I share with a photograph entail the existence of a subject in my own case? Furthermore, if the photograph counts as a subject then this is a *reductio* of my position. A photograph is a visual representation of a subject's visual field but does not count as a subject because there is presumably nothing it is like to be the photograph. It is not a bearer of experience. It could be argued that a photograph does not even bear colours, rather it reflects light and it only has colours for a subject. On the other hand, this SPACE encompasses experienced properties. Furthermore, the photograph presumably has no sense of self-presence built in. Neither can egocentric properties such as the viewpoint explain this sense of being aware. A mere central point in visual space does not explain why I seem to be located HERE rather than elsewhere. There are, then, critical differences between one's own case and visual representations of a perspective.¹⁸

Perhaps this open space only exists whenever I attend HERE. Is this an unusual state of experience which does not extend to ordinary states of consciousness? Is the act of attending inwards somehow creating this SPACE? Certainly without attending HERE I would not have this experience of spacious emptiness. However, my contention is that this is what I am whether I am aware of it or not. A reason for holding this, apart from the arguments of Section 2, is that to experience the world I need to be open to it. If my head, face, or eyes got in

¹⁸ A closely related topic is Williams' (1973) classic discussion of imagined visual perspectives. I do not discuss imagination here as this adds yet further complications.

the way (i.e. appeared in the visual field) I could not experience my friend's face. I need to be built open to receive their face, whether I am aware of it or not. The experiments purportedly reveal my original condition; they do not create a new one. I become aware of the fact that the lived relationship between myself and others is face-to-space, never face-to-face (Harding, 2000, p. 17). The same applies to other the senses. I feel the cat's fur not my hand stroking it. I hear the bell not my ear drum. The experiencing subject is never an object for itself, but rather always entirely open to the world (for a classic discussion see Sartre, 1943/1956, pp. 303–5).

Why take the experience described in this paper as the fundamental type of self-awareness rather than bodily experience? There is for example proprioception, the sense of the position of my limbs. Is this a form of self-awareness? If so, does this conflict with the current findings? In fact, there are many types of self-awareness. The meanings of 'self' and 'I' are multivocal (for a defence see Strawson, 2009, pp. 331–3). My sense of having a body is essential to my everyday interactions with people and the world. This, including how I appear to others, is part of my third-person identity. However, seeming to be 'in' a body with a precise shape and boundaries is plausibly more to do with imagination than sensory experience. For example, when I feel what I call a 'headache' there is certainly an ache, but somatically speaking my 'head-experience' is partial, vague in boundaries, dynamically changing, and has no clear shape. I certainly associate these sensations with head parts, but there is little that is head-like about the actual feel of them.¹⁹

There is also my first-person identity, how I seem for myself, which is not always recognized. The scene, my thoughts, and my bodily experience all occur in this spacious awareness, or so is my experience. This first-person identity is seemingly that which unifies all of the different types of self-awareness including the sense of embodiment and sense of personhood. I could conceivably lose my sense of embodiment and personhood and still be this subject to which things

¹⁹ Do these various head sensations block up the SPACE in some sense? There are two points to note in response. Firstly, as these feels are colourless they do not interfere with the SPACE functioning as a capacity for visual scenes. Secondly, the specific feelings at a particular location in the experiential space are constantly changing. As a specific feeling at time T could be replaced by a different feeling at that location (or none at all), those specific feels are not essential properties of the experiential space. In principle, that particular location can function as a capacity for any feeling.

are presented. This is what I need to minimally be me. It is what I seem to be at the centre of my phenomenal world. Hence, I take the self-experience investigated here to be compatible with other types of self-awareness, at the same time as being the most fundamental type of self-awareness.

8. Concluding Comments

The question of this paper was whether there was an experienceable candidate for the subject of experience. I used reasoning and phenomenological considerations to infer that a minimal synchronic subject (a bearer of experience) should be lacking in sensory qualities in itself and single. This provided criteria for what the experience should be like to count as a minimal self-experience. With the assistance of experiments designed by Douglas Harding I found that there is such an experience. I seem to be looking out of a gap. This open SPACE apparently lacks sensory qualities and is seemingly single. I also found that this SPACE encompasses other sensory properties; that is, it functions as a bearer of experience in general. Neither does it seem to be a mere gap, as I seem to be looking from here. It is an aware-space. As the experience meets the criteria for being a self-experience, it hence provides *prima facie* justification for the reality of the subject.

Even if there seems to be a subject it does not follow that there *is* a subject. How exactly does one move from phenomenal experience to metaphysics? The answer I offered was that there does not need to be a necessary connection between phenomenology and metaphysics. Rather, all that needs to be claimed is that the experience provides *prima facie* justification for believing that this is me. My experience is that I am a capacity for the scene, thoughts, and feelings. If this is also true for you, then as empiricists this should be our default starting position on the nature of the self until proven otherwise. This is a form of empirical dogmatism (Pryor, 2000), in a broad sense of 'empirical'.

This justification is bolstered by the independent considerations on the nature of the subject as discussed in Section 2. In the reverse direction, the experience provides a *prima facie* verification of the hypothesis that there is a bearer of experience. As the experience and the rational considerations were arrived at independently of each other they can be used as mutually supporting sources of justification (Goldman, 2004, pp. 5–6). The phenomenological and rational routes converge on the same conclusion.

The current findings suggest that Hume, and most others since, failed in the search for the experiencer because they were attending in the wrong direction. They were attending outwards when they should have attended inwards. In fact, it is common within meditative traditions to hold that the method for recognizing the essential nature of one's self requires a reversal of attention away from the objects of experience (Shear and Jevning, 1999, pp. 190–1). Harding provides precise instructions on how to do this: attend 180 degrees from the black markings on the page you are currently seeing to who or what is apparently seeing them.

This SPACE does not seem to be a body or brain. I take these first-person findings to hence provide *prima facie* support for the thesis that the subject is a thin bearer of experience. This is a version of the substance view of the self. However, I generally avoid the term 'substance' because for many it is synonymous with bare particulars and substance dualism, both of which I reject. The substance view of the self does not commit one to the existence of particulars without properties — 'bare particulars' — which would be paradoxical.²⁰ I prefer the term 'thin subject' or 'thin bearer of experience' which is a subject that necessarily has experiences (Strawson, 2009).

In fact, most of the objections to the substance view apply specifically to substance dualism (Olson, 2007, pp. 164–8). However, the existence of a thin subject does not entail the possibility of disembodied free-floating subjects. Alternatives to substance dualism are substance monist views such as idealism and panpsychism. I find panpsychism to be the most plausible theory of consciousness on independent grounds (Chalmers, 2015; Goff, 2017; Strawson, 2006). Science tells us about the structural-dispositional nature of physical things, but not what they are intrinsically, in themselves (Eddington, 1928; Russell, 1927/2007, pp. 263–4). A panpsychist substance monism can avoid the pitfalls of substance dualism by positing that conscious substances are the intrinsic nature of physical entities. The in-itself is the for-itself (Harding, 1952/2011, p. 116; William James in his unpublished notes: Perry, 1935, p. 446). Furthermore, accepting a thin bearer of experience does not entail that the subject is soul-like in the sense of being atomistic and separate from other subjects. Subjects may overlap or perhaps there is ultimately only one Self or

²⁰ Sider (2006) provides a defence of the intelligibility of substances (substratum), and even allows for the possibility of bare particulars.

Consciousness, as held in the tradition of the Perennial Philosophy (Albahari, forthcoming; Harding, 1952/2011: see also Goff, forthcoming, on cosmopsychism).

There is nothing new in the present first-person findings. Reference to the void-like nature of the self (or Self) is found in many Eastern and mystical traditions (Forman, 1999; Harding, 1961/1986; Shear, 1998; Shear and Jevning, 1999). These diverse first-person investigations across many cultures, ancient and contemporary, describe one's own essential nature (Self in Advaita Vedanta or Buddha-Nature in Buddhism) as empty, still, and void.²¹ Harding's experiments shed light on these otherwise mysterious reports. However, his methods are not 'mystical' or 'spiritual' at all, but coldly scientific. Rather, they provide systematic and repeatable means for investigating what I am for myself.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to David Chalmers, Philip Goff, Eric Schwitzgebel, Jonathan Simon, Declan Smithies, and Daniel Stoljar for helpful comments on versions of the manuscript. Special thanks to Richard Lang and Robert Penny for illuminating conversations on Douglas Harding's philosophy.

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²¹ Of course, it may just seem to be this way for meditators. I do not rely upon these reports. However, they do bear a striking resemblance to the present experience of interest. If the reports are reliable then they are another source of *prima facie* evidence as to the nature of the self.

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Paper received March 2017; revised June 2017.