

The Objects of Bodily Awareness

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ABSTRACT: Is it possible to misidentify the object of an episode of bodily awareness? I argue that it is, on the grounds that a person can reasonably be unsure or mistaken as to which part of her body he or she is aware of at a given moment. This requires discussing the phenomenon of body ownership, and defending the claim that the proper parts of one's body are at least no less 'principal' among the objects of bodily awareness than is the body as a whole. I conclude with some reasons why this should lead us to think that bodily awareness, unlike introspection, is a form of perception.

Is it ever possible, in being aware of an attribute of one's own body 'from the inside', to misidentify which object one is aware of? To answer negatively is to take what Martin calls a 'single-object' view of bodily awareness, according to which it presents a person 'with only a single object, him or herself' (Martin 1997: 119). By contrast, if we hold that bodily awareness can concern the attributes of a range of different things, then we have taken a 'multiple-object' view of it, according to which it is necessary to identify, and so possible to *misidentify*, its objects. Sydney Shoemaker has suggested that such a possibility of misidentification may be a characteristic mark of perceptual awareness as such:

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Ordinary modes of perception admit of our perceiving, successively or simultaneously, a multiplicity of different objects, all of which are on a par as nonfactual objects of perception. There is such a thing as singling out one from a multiplicity of perceived objects, distinguishing it from the others (which may be of the same kind as it) by its perceived properties and its position in a space of perceived objects. (Shoemaker 1986: 107-108)

Following Bermúdez (1998: 136), let's call this claim – that perception requires the possibility of misidentification – the ‘multiple-objects constraint’ on what it is to be a form of perception, and take it on board as a working hypothesis. Given the multiple-objects constraint, a single-object conception of bodily awareness will be one on which it cannot be perceptual, while on a multiple-object conception this constraint raises no such hurdle. Certain philosophers² have challenged whether the multiple-objects constraint identifies a necessary condition on perception at all, but this dispute will not concern us here; rather the central aim of this paper is to show that the single-object view of bodily awareness is simply mistaken, and moreover that we do have good reason to regard such awareness as a form of inner perception.

1. The single-object view

The *locus classicus* for a single-object view of bodily awareness is Evans's *Varieties of Reference*, which argues that each of the various elements (he lists ‘our proprioceptive sense, our sense of balance, of heat and cold, and of pressure’) making up our capacity for bodily awareness

² E.g. Ayers 1991 (vol. 2, pp. 287-288), Martin 1997, and Bermúdez 2003.

... appears to give rise to judgements which are immune to error through misidentification. ... There just does not appear to be a gap between the subject's having information (or appearing to have information), in the appropriate way, that the property of being *F* is instantiated, and his having information (or appearing to have information) that *he* is *F*; for him to have, or appear to have, the information that the property is instantiated just is for it to appear to him that *he* is *F*. (Evans 1982: 220-221)

As his gloss on the notion of immunity to error through misidentification makes clear, Evans is not at all claiming that the various channels of bodily awareness are *infallible*, such that it is not possible for one to appear to be aware in one of these ways that he or she is *F* unless that is how one actually is, but rather that such awareness (or seeming awareness) essentially cannot leave open the question of *which thing* it is an awareness (or seeming awareness)³ of. Whereas visual experience might reveal to a person that there is someone sitting in front of her but leave room for the perceiver to question, say, whether that person is her father or his identical twin, there is no way for bodily awareness to take as its object anything other than oneself, and so no room for such a question to make sense.

Evans's single-object conception of bodily awareness has also been defended by Martin:

One can think of such awareness as awareness for each subject of just one object, his or her own body. There is no object distinct from this body which any individual could be aware of in the same way. Although this is a form of single-object awareness, nevertheless we can explain how someone can take themselves to be aware of a genuine

³ In what follows I will usually leave out this qualification, but it should be assumed wherever appropriate.

object through sensation, kinaesthesia and proprioception and how such awareness can be informative of a single object without having to suppose any supernatural mechanism.

(Martin 1997: 125)

For Evans and Martin, there is no sense to the idea that the object of bodily awareness could be anything other than the subject's own body, and so also no sense to the question: 'I am aware in this way that *something* is *F*, but which thing is it?' And if the multiple-objects constraint marks a legitimate condition on what it is to be a form of perception, then this will be enough to establish the non-perceptual character of bodily awareness. Our immediate question is whether Evans and Martin are right to endorse the single-object view.

2. A problem for the single-object view

A familiar argument against the single-object view of bodily awareness derives from the possibility of a person's having sensations that derive from the state of a body other than his or her own, as for example in an imagined case of Armstrong's:

We can conceive of being directly hooked-up, say by a transmission of waves in some medium, to the body of another. In such a case we might become aware e.g. of the movements of another's limbs, in much the same sort of way that we become aware of the motion of our own limbs. (Armstrong 1984: 113)

If Armstrong's way of characterizing this hypothetical case is legitimate, then the single-object conception of bodily awareness cannot be correct: for then it will be possible for one's ways of

being aware of his or her own body also to be ways of being aware of the body of someone else, and so there can be a gap between knowing in this way that something is *F* and knowing that that thing is oneself.

It is this objection that is supposed to be headed off by Evans's restriction of his account of bodily awareness to sensory information that is had 'in the appropriate way': the idea is that whatever is going on in cases like the one described by Armstrong, they are *not* ones in which people are aware of the bodies of others 'in much the same sort of way that we become aware' of our own. Rather, the most that can happen in such a case is that an entirely *distinct* mode of sense perception is established, which enables a person to monitor what happens in the body of another without relying on any of the usual channels. And even if we were to imagine that the associated mode of experience *seemed* just like the inner awareness of one's own body even as it actually concerns the bodily states of a different person, this would not show that in an ordinary instance of seeming bodily awareness any identificatory work needs to be done to determine whether the body one is aware of is one's own, as in such a case there is no reason for a skeptical hypothesis to be in play.

This response is perfectly adequate so far as it goes, but the discussion of these points has tended to look past a much more common way in which it is possible to misidentify the object of bodily awareness, namely insofar as a person is concerned not with *which body* he or she is aware of at a given moment but rather with *which part* of his or her body an episode of bodily awareness concerns. We can see this quite clearly by thinking about proprioception: for example, if Jack experiences what seems to be the movement of his right index finger there may not be a good sense to be given to the question whether it is *his* finger whose motion he is aware of, but it seems entirely possible, and entirely natural to take into account, that Jack might experience

what seems to be the movement of his index finger only to find out that the motion he felt was really that of his thumb. Thus it makes sense for Jack to ask: 'I am certainly aware that *one* of my fingers is moving, but which one is it?' (And perhaps he looks down to see.) The same sort of possibility seems to hold in Evans's examples of the awareness of bodily temperature and pressure: Jill might seem to feel something pressing against the outside of her thigh when in fact it is pressure on her calf that she feels; she might seem to feel a warm sensation in her elbow when in fact the warmth she feels is located further up her arm; and so on. Bodily awareness is able to put one in touch with a whole range of things, namely all the various proper parts of one's own body, and it can be no small achievement for a subject to determine which of them he or she is aware of at any given time. If this is right, then the single-object view of bodily awareness is mistaken.

Put another way, the idea here is that much as it would be a mistake to analyze visual perception as a source of knowledge simply of 'the external world' rather than the manifold things that the world contains, so we misunderstand bodily awareness if we regard it as having just one object: it does indeed make one aware of just one *human body*, but that body is composed of many discrete parts, and it is up to the subject to identify which of these any given episode of bodily awareness concerns. Bodily awareness is not, then, wholly immune to error through misidentification in the way that Evans and his defenders have supposed.

3. Two responses

It seems clear that it would be hopeless to try resisting this conclusion in the way that Evans and his followers have traditionally dealt with cases like Armstrong's. For in order for such a response to succeed, we would have to regard each of the various channels of bodily

awareness – proprioception, the senses of pressure and temperature, and so on – as further composed of many discrete sensory subsystems, each providing information only about a particular bodily region in much the same way as bodily awareness in general is essentially limited to the domain of one's own body. But what independent reason is there to endorse such a picture? For example, on our ordinary conception we think of proprioception simply as the sense of 'present bodily position and posture' (Gallagher 2005: 46); this alternative view, by contrast, would mean regarding the proprioceptive awareness of each proper part of one's body as a channel of awareness fundamentally distinct from that of any other, and consequently treating the term 'proprioception' as picking out only a disjunctive kind. Perhaps some further argument could be given to make such a consequence more palatable, but absent such development it is far harder to take on than the surprising but much more straightforward idea that bodily awareness is not immune to error in quite the way that certain philosophers have thought.

The other, somewhat more promising response to our argument would hold that even though cases like the ones described above do show the possibility of a person's misidentifying which body parts he or she is aware of, nevertheless strictly speaking the sole *object* of bodily self-awareness is simply one's body, and so the fact that one can't be wrong about whose body he or she is aware of in this way is sufficient to rule out the possibility of error through misidentification. This seems to be the view of Martin, who writes that in bodily awareness 'of course one is presented with a multiplicity of body parts, but they are presented as parts of one single body' (1997: 125). On Martin's view, we should 'deny that the proper objects of ... bodily awareness are the body parts *per se* into which the nervous system extends, and instead suggest that the body as a whole, of which the body parts are parts, is the principal object of awareness'

(ibid.: 128). We can read this as an attempt to acknowledge the phenomenon identified in §2 above without giving up the single-object view of bodily awareness.

What does it mean to say that the ‘body as a whole’, rather than its parts, is the ‘proper’ or ‘principal’ object of bodily awareness? For Martin, the presentation of one’s various body parts to bodily awareness ‘as parts of one single body’ rather than wholly independent objects derives from the ‘sense of ownership’ characteristic of bodily awareness:

When I feel an ache in my ankle, the ankle that feels hurt to me does not just feel like an ankle belonging to some body or other. Rather, the ankle feels to me to be a part of my body. This feeling is present even in the case of phantom-limb sensations. It is not as if it feels to the subject as if there is a pain at some place in midair. Instead, it feels to her as if a part of her body is located at that place, even though the relevant body part no longer exists. ... in having bodily sensations, it appears to one as if whatever one is aware of through having such sensation is a part of one’s body. This contrasts strikingly with the traditional five senses, which can present to one a manifold of objects, one’s body being merely one among this manifold. (Martin 1995: 269)

The phenomenon Martin identifies here is an important one, but is it enough to save the single-object view? There are two reasons to think it is not. First, it is open to an adherent of the multiple-object view to explain the phenomenon of ownership by observing that when a proper part of one’s body – say, one’s right elbow – is presented to bodily awareness it is presented not just as ‘*an* elbow’ but rather as ‘*my* elbow’, while denying that this requires regarding that body part as something less than a ‘principal’ object of awareness. It may be true that part of what it is

for an elbow to *be* my elbow is for it to be spatially contiguous with the rest of my body, but in acknowledging this we need not think that the body's proper parts are objects of bodily awareness in only a secondary sense; indeed, we might hold instead that it is *by* being aware of the proper parts of one's body that one becomes aware of the structure of his or her body 'as a whole'.

Secondly, there are some important aspects of the phenomenology of bodily awareness that Martin's single-object view has trouble accounting for. When one describes the contents of an episode of bodily self-awareness one does so not just by reference to the experienced state of 'my body', but rather by describing the apparent attributes of one's hands, feet, shoulders, and so on. It certainly seems *possible* that an organism's episodes of bodily self-awareness might inform it only of certain properties of its body in general, and not directly of the properties of its body parts – but merely describing such a case is enough to show that that is not how things are with us. In our case, bodily self-awareness is principally concerned not with the state of the body in its entirety, but rather with what is happening in its various parts. Thus indeed there is such a thing as having to identify the 'principal object' one is aware of in this way as one part of one's body rather than another. This is a skill that it takes some time to develop, and even once we have acquired it there is still the possibility of going wrong.

We can bring this second point out more vividly by comparing bodily awareness to introspection, which is the classic case of a mode of awareness that counts as non-perceptual given Shoemaker's multiple-objects constraint. In the introspective awareness of a mental episode there is a clear counterpart to Martin's 'sense of ownership' of the episode in question: unless one is suffering from some sort of schizophrenic delusion, any one of his or her mental episodes will exhibit itself *as* belonging to his or her own mind, and thus there is no room to

question whether it is oneself that one is aware of in this way. But the case of introspection also leaves no room for a phenomenon like the one we have identified in bodily awareness: that is, not only does it not make sense to wonder whether it is *one's own* mind that one is introspecting, but it also makes no sense to wonder which *part* of one's mind is presently the object of introspection, for the mind simply is not naturally partitioned into proper subparts in the way that a human body is. (Perhaps this is a kernel of truth in Descartes' claim that the mind cannot be an extended thing.) If we treat introspection as the paradigm case of single-object awareness, then this difference between it and the inner awareness of one's body seems a good reason for endorsing the multiple-object conception of bodily awareness, and regarding the proper parts of one's body as 'all on a par' as possible objects of it.

4. Conclusion

If the foregoing argument is sound, then there is no reason to think that bodily awareness should be classified as non-perceptual according to the multiple-objects constraint; but can more be said in favor of the idea that bodily awareness *is* a form of perception? That is, we have shown that bodily awareness meets one of the suggested necessary conditions on being perceptual, but can we draw out a reason to think that meeting this condition might also *suffice* to count it as such?

It appears that we can. We have shown not just that bodily awareness has a range of possible objects, but also that in such awareness a certain region of the mind-independent world is opened up to one: this region has its boundaries, to be sure, but it is presented to the mind principally as an assemblage of spatially distinct parts rather than a phenomenologically undifferentiated mass. And thus there seems to be no good reason to regard the 'outer' awareness

of one's body – through, say, vision or touch – as perceptual but the 'inner' awareness of it as not so: it is true that the outer senses take things as their objects that the inner ones essentially cannot, but the two cases seem to share a common essence. If introspection is our model for a non-perceptual mode of awareness while vision, touch, and audition are our standard examples of perception, then the fact that bodily awareness has this sort of range in its objects is a good reason for classifying it along with the more common sorts of sense perception, and trying to account for its distinctiveness among the various perceptual modalities instead of classifying it altogether separately from them.⁴

It remains, however, that despite its evidently perceptual character bodily awareness is nevertheless subject to a *kind* of immunity to error through misidentification that other modes of sense-perception usually are not.⁵ For as we acknowledged above, there seems to be no room for

⁴ How might this last thing be done? In my (2011) I suggest that we can understand the 'non-observational' character of the awareness of one's intentional actions not in terms of its independence from sense-perception (for of course we very often *are* sense-perceptually aware of what we do), but rather in terms of the role that the awareness of one's intentional actions plays in guiding the actions themselves: in being aware of one's action one does not simply 'sit back' and 'take in' what one does, but rather brings one's awareness to bear in keeping one's actions on course. (In this I essentially follow the lead of O'Shaughnessy (1962).) Importantly, however, this possibility is as much a characteristic of the 'ordinary' modes of sense perception as it is of the awareness of one's body. But while this alone is not enough to explain what makes bodily awareness distinctive as a form of perception, nevertheless it does seem to show that *many* instances of bodily awareness (i.e., those of intentional bodily movements) are quite different from *most* instances of awareness through 'outer sense' (which of course is usually of things independent of oneself). No doubt there is much more that could be said about these points.

⁵ I say 'usually' because there *are* cases in which one's body is presented to oneself 'from the outside' in ways that leave no room for the question whose body one is aware of: for example, as I look down right now and see my

the question which *body*, and so also which *person*, one is aware of when one is aware of one's body 'from the inside'. This does not, we have argued, amount to the thesis that there is no misidentifying the *object* of an episode of bodily awareness, but given that one has identified which part of one's body one is aware of there is no room for further misidentification, and so no need for perception, in identifying that body part *as mine*. The awareness of a bodily part 'as mine' appears to be an essential characteristic of bodily awareness, and also of its role in action and self-control, and so allowing that bodily awareness is non-perceptual in this limited respect helps to account for the phenomena that attract philosophers like Evans and Martin to the single-object view while differing importantly from their interpretation of them.⁶

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hands at the keyboard. But this is not essential to the visual or haptic awareness of one's body as it is to the awareness of one's body through proprioception and kinesthesia.

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