Awareness

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ABSTRACT We can be *aware of* particulars, properties, events, propositions, facts, skills, and qualia. We can also have *knowledge of* and be *conscious of* a similar range of objects. We can, furthermore, be *ignorant of* such objects. Awareness is quite clearly related to knowledge, consciousness, and ignorance. But how? This entry explores some of the ways that awareness is (not) related to knowledge, consciousness, and ignorance. It also explores some of the ways that awareness might be required by, and thus *fundamental to*, these other relations. The emerging insight is that additional clarity on the nature of awareness stands poised to add clarity to a wide range of philosophical issues in both epistemology and the philosophy of mind.

What is awareness? Progress in answering this question can be made if we turn our focus from the nominalization 'awareness' and towards the adjective from which it is arguably derived: 'aware of'. There are various objects 'aware of' can take. You can be aware of *particulars* (e.g. aware of *the cat*), you can be aware of *properties* of particulars (e.g. aware of *the color* of the cat), you can be aware of *events* (e.g. aware of *the arrival* of a cat), you can be aware of *propositions* (e.g. aware of *the meaning of the sentence* 'some cats bite mothers'), you can be aware of *facts* (e.g. aware of *the fact that* cats are mammals), you can be aware of *qualia* (e.g. aware of *what it's like* to pet a cat), and you can be aware of *skills* (aware of *how to* scare cats). English corpora searches provide a rich range of examples where the expression 'aware of' takes all these objects. A similar range of objects are taken by 'conscious of', 'knows', and 'ignorant of'. This entry will briefly compare awareness and consciousness-of (Section 1), it will explain how different kinds of awareness might be related to different kinds of knowledge (Section 2), it will explain how ignorance and awareness seem to be related (Section 3), and it will highlight a few metaphysical positions to take on the unity of awareness relations (Section 4).

1. Awareness and Consciousness

The adjective 'conscious' has an intransitive use that is silent about whether one's phenomenal experiences relate them to the world. For example, a physician might affirm that their patient is *conscious*, but remain silent about what exactly their patient is *conscious of*. 'Conscious of' is the transitive use of 'conscious' and it is tempting to treat 'conscious of' and 'aware of' as expressions that refer to the same relation because both have much in common (Dretske 1993). *First*, 'conscious of' functions like 'aware of' in taking many of the objects noted above. You can, for example, be conscious of particulars, properties, events, propositions, and facts. *Second*, 'aware of' and 'conscious of' are both gradable adjectives. You can be somewhat or completely aware (/conscious) of the fact that climate change is a problem. Further, while we both might be conscious (/aware) of the fact that climate change is a problem, you might be more conscious (/aware) of it than I am. *Third*, 'aware of' and 'conscious of' are both world-implicating: the objects of both consciousness and awareness must exist. You cannot be aware (/conscious) of a cat in your room if there is no cat in your room; you cannot be aware (/conscious) of the stillness of the cat in your room if the cat is not still; and so on. *Fourth*, 'conscious of' entails 'aware of': S is conscious of x only if S is aware of x.

All of the previous points suggest a potential identification of consciousness-of and awareness. But any such identity will be problematic. *First*, and perhaps least importantly, the adjective 'aware' seems to lack an intransitive use in English. For example, it is quite odd to claim that 'Jack is aware' without implicitly or explicitly supplying an object that Jack is aware of. *Second*, consciousness of objects seems to demand some degree of attention while the awareness of objects does not. For example, it feels strained to consider someone as being conscious of a fact while not directing any attention to it whatsoever. But one can be aware of facts without attending to them. Since you memorized and have not forgotten your multiplication tables, you are aware of the fact that the product of 5 and 5 is 25. But you were aware of that fact even *before* I drew your attention to it. Similarly, you knew and have not forgotten that you were (not) home last night. It too is a fact that you were aware of even *before* directing your attention to it. In this way being aware of the fact that p should be distinguished from *attending to* as well as *being conscious of* the fact that p. *Third*, if 'conscious of' and 'aware of' had the same meaning, then specifications of sources of awareness (the means by which we become aware) should be specifications of sources of consciousness. We specify sources of awareness with modal qualifiers: 'She's *perceptually* aware of the fact that he arrived', 'She is *introspectively* aware of the fact that she's hungry', and 'She's *inferentially* aware of the fact that the value of x is 3' are all examples. But talk of 'sources of consciousness' in the same sense is odd, and talk of 'being perceptually conscious of the fact that p' and 'being introspectively conscious of the fact that p' seem either infelicitous or to indicate something different than their corresponding expressions with 'aware of'. *Fourth*, if 'aware of' and 'conscious of' were synonymous expressions, then 'She is *aware of what it's like* to eat toasted halloumi' should express the same thought as 'She is *conscious of what it's like* to eat toasted halloumi'. But these don't seem to express the same thought. Expressions of 'S is conscious of what it's like to F' suggest that one is in a higher-order state that is focused on the first-order state of what it's like to F. Further, one can remain aware of what it's like to F by remembering what it's like to F. Thus, falling asleep or becoming unconscious doesn't prevent one

from being aware of what it's like to F. In contrast, one cannot be conscious of what it's like to F while sleeping or unconscious. *Fifth*, if 'aware of' and 'conscious of' were synonymous expressions, then 'She is *consciously aware* of the fact that p' and 'She is *consciously conscious* of the fact that p' should express the same thought because they have been modified with the same adverb. But their meanings clearly differ. In connection with this, it is worth noting that the adverb 'consciously' lacks a parallel adverb associated with awareness. For it makes sense to point out that one can be aware of something in a way that is conscious, e.g. 'S is consciously aware of x'. But it is either meaningless or redundant to claim that one can be conscious of something 'in an aware way'.

If it is possible to be aware of particulars, properties, events, and so forth without being conscious of them, it raises questions about the epistemic significance of consciousness-of. After all, to be aware of such things is to stand in a robust epistemic-cognitive relation to them. Arguably, then, there are at least some robust epistemic-cognitive states that non-conscious beings can enjoy, e.g. zombies or sufficiently advanced large language models. For example, it has been argued that the awareness of facts provides us with reasons and it can also constitute propositional knowledge in good external conditions (Huemer 2001; Silva 2023). If correct, this provides some reason to think that reasons-responsiveness and knowledge don't require consciousness. For potential resistance to the idea that non-conscious beings can be reasons-responsive and stand in states as robust as knowledge, see Smithies (2020). For some limitations to the role of conscious experience in the production, possession, and transmission of knowledge, see J. L. Mackie (1970).

2. Awareness and Knowledge

There are various knowledge relations. You know *your mother* (personal knowledge), you know *how to* make coffee (know-how), you know *that* it's a lot of work to grow quality coffee beans (propositional knowledge), and you know *what it's like* to drink coffee. While each of the previous claims involves the word 'knows' in English, it is widely thought that 'knows' is used to refer to a range of distinct relations. This is consistent with the idea that each knowledge-relation might be identified with a corresponding awareness relation. After all, you can be aware of people, aware of facts, aware of how to do things, and aware of what it's like to do or experience things.

Unfortunately, there are various problems with this suggestion. There is no straightforward way to identify personal knowledge with the awareness of people. Knowing Bob Dylan is clearly a more demanding relation than being aware of Bob Dylan. You can be aware of Bob Dylan just by looking at him while he crosses the street or, perhaps, even by simply learning that there exists a person named 'Bob Dylan'. But neither instance of awareness would be enough to count as knowing Bob Dylan (cf. Benton 2017; Duncan 2020). In contrast, it is hard to see how awareness of *what it's like* to F and knowledge of *what it's like* to F could differ. There is also some plausibility to the idea that know-how could be identified with awareness-how. After all, it is difficult so see how being aware of how to ride a bike differs from knowing how to ride a bike. Perhaps, awareness-how is less demanding than knowledge-how in ways that allow us to draw a distinction between them. One route to such a view would be to identify know-how with a certain kind of propositional knowledge (Pavese 2021) and to identify awareness-how with a certain kind of factual awareness, and then go

on to hold the view that factual awareness (being aware of the fact that p) is less demanding than propositional knowledge. So let us turn to this issue: what is the relationship between propositional knowledge and factual awareness?

The expression 'aware of the fact that' is a commonplace, not at all a philosopher's term of art. We often criticize each other in terms of awareness: 'You were aware of the fact that it was wrong, but you did it anyway!' We sometimes seek to excuse ourselves from wrongdoing in terms of awareness: 'I'm sorry, I wasn't aware of the fact that you would be hurt by my action.' We admonish each other in terms of awareness: 'You should be aware of the fact that you can easily offend Germans by making casual jokes about their football.' Were we to suspect a person of being ignorant of an important detail, we might naturally seek to inform them of both their ignorance and the important detail with a question about awareness: 'Are you aware of the fact that the borders have been closed?' These are not oblique expressions that call out for artful interpretation. When these expressions are used for the purposes of criticizing, excusing, admonishing, and informing, they are meant to be understood straightforwardly in terms of sentence-meaning. Such uses presuppose the existence of a state of awareness that one can be in or fail to be in with regard to some fact. Here lies the phenomenon of factual awareness.

There is much that factual awareness and propositional knowledge have in common (Dretske 1993; Huemer 2001; Littlejohn 2015; Silva 2023). They seem interchangeable in performing the aforementioned speech acts of criticism, excuse, admonition, and the like. Factual awareness and propositional knowledge are both factive. You can neither know that p nor can you be aware that p if p fails to obtain. Factual awareness and propositional knowledge are both conceptually demanding. You can be visually aware of *the cat* because you're looking at it in normal visual conditions. But without possessing the concept CAT, you cannot know or be aware of the fact *that the cat is nearby*. Factual awareness and propositional knowledge have some kind of non-accidentality requirement. Suppose you took a pill that randomly induced the belief *that a clown just stumbled into a tree near your home*. Even if that turned out to be true, you would neither know nor be aware of the fact that it was true. (In this regard it helps to separate *being aware of a proposition which happens to be true* from *being aware that a proposition is true*.) Neither propositional knowledge nor factual awareness has an attention requirement. You learned and have not forgotten that 2+2=4. It's a fact you both know and are now aware of. But that was true *even before* I drew your attention to it just now. Similarly, you were aware of the fact *that this is a text written in English* even though you may well not have been attending to that fact before reading this sentence. And in a moment your attention to it will fade away as you concentrate on the meaning of these sentences, rather than on their particular linguistic representation in English. Factual awareness, like propositional knowledge, is an amodal relation. That is, it is a relation that is not tied to any particular modality (visual, auditory, memorial, inferential, testimony, etc.). In contrast, seeing that p, hearing that p, remembering that p, and being informed that p is each tied to some particular way of coming to stand in a factive relation to p. Lastly, just as factual awareness entails itself, propositional knowledge also entails factual awareness: if you know that p, then you are aware of the fact that p.

All of this would suggest that we can identify factual awareness and propositional knowledge (Littlejohn 2015; cf. Dretske 1993) or, perhaps, treat factual awareness as a way of knowing (Nagel

2017). But neither view is without opposition. Many have argued that factual awareness does not require belief, undefeated justification to believe, the absence of environmental luck, or being in a position to know p (cf. Huemer 2001; Peacocke 2006: 360; McGlynn 2014; Silva 2023). But propositional knowledge requires all of these. Others have argued that one can see that p without believing that p, without having justification to believe that p, without the absence of environmental luck, and without being in a position to know p (cf. McDowell 2002; Turri 2010; Pritchard 2012; Schroeder 2021). Sven Bernecker (2010) has argued for the same in the case of remembering that p. So if seeing that p and remembering that p entail being aware of the fact that p, then it follows that factual awareness does not require belief, justification to believe, the absence of environmental luck, or being in a position to know p.

Further, evidence against any easy identification or reduction of factual awareness to propositional knowledge stems from the apparent gradability of factual awareness and the non-gradability of propositional knowledge. Many theorists have observed that propositional knowledge is not gradable. It doesn't make sense to talk of 'knowing that p more than some else knows that p' or 'somewhat knowing that p' or 'fully knowing that p'. While Hetherington (2001) defended the gradability of 'knows that', Stanley (2005) drew attention to a body of linguistic evidence that strongly supports the non-gradability of 'knows that'. In contrast, the factive stative adjectives are gradable. Expressions such as 'is somewhat aware of the fact that', 'is vaguely aware of the fact that', 'is very aware of the fact that', 'is completely aware of the fact that', and 'is fully aware of the fact that' are semantically unproblematic and examples of them are easily found in English language corpus searches. This difference in gradeability has potential metaphysical bite. For often if we have two general conditions that we want to reduce, and one is gradable while the other not, the direction of reduction involves taking the gradable condition as the more basic condition not the non-gradable condition.

How might factual awareness and propositional knowledge be related if these arguments hold? Some have suggested that a genus-species relation explains this: propositional knowledge is a species of the genus *factual awareness,* where propositional knowledge is a more demanding instance of factual awareness (Silva 2023; cf. Huemer 2001). If correct, this provides only a minimal amount of structure in the factual awareness/propositional knowledge relation because it leaves many open questions. For exploration of those questions and potential answers see Silva (2023).

3. Awareness and Ignorance

The distinction between *knowledge* and *ignorance* is a perfectly ordinary distinction. Indeed, Williamson (2000: v) has argued that taking this distinction as a starting point can enable progress on many questions in epistemology. Knowledge and ignorance are clearly contrary relations. But can ignorance just be the absence of knowledge as so many have taken it to be (cf. Peels & Blaauw 2016)? The expression 'ignorant of the fact that' and its contraction 'ignorant that' are what we might call *negative factive adjectival expressions*. That is, they are adjectival expressions that imply the absence of some relation to a fact.

In contrast, the expression 'knows that' is a positive factive verbal expression: a verbal expression that implies the presence of some relation to a fact. But positive factive expressions are not limited to verbal expressions, as we have seen 'aware of the fact that' and its contraction 'aware that' are positive factive adjectival expressions. And it's natural to treat 'aware of the fact that' and 'not ignorant of the fact that' as synonymous expressions. Even when we consider instances of these adjectives without factive complements, 'aware of' remains nicely paired off with 'ignorant of'. After all, they are adjectives that take the same range of objects: one can be ignorant of *particulars and their properties* (e.g. ignorant of *the ball's color*), one can be ignorant of *propositions* (e.g. ignorant of *the meaning of the sentence* 'hadrons cannot exist without quarks'), one can be ignorant of *facts* (e.g. ignorant of *the fact* that the nearest person to hollywood's most famous actor is a clown), and one can be ignorant of *skills* (ignorant of *how to* solve quadratic equations), and one can be ignorant of *qualia* (e.g. ignorant of *what it is like* to pet a cat). And no matter the object, on purely semantic grounds we can transition from claims of the absence of ignorance to claims of the presence of awareness, and vice versa. This provides non-trivial evidence for the idea that ignorance should be understood in terms of the absence of awareness. For more on different kinds of ignorance, see Peels (2023). For detailed arguments in support of the idea that factual ignorance should be understood in terms of the absence of factual awareness see Silva and Siscoe (2023).

4. A Question of Unity

Above we noted that agents can be aware of different objects: particulars, properties of particulars, events, propositions, facts, qualia, and skills. How are all of these object-relative instantiations of awareness united? On one view, each object-relative instance of awareness is a determinate of the determinable *awareness*. On another view, each object-relative instance of awareness is a species of the common genus *awareness*. On yet another view, there is no unifying story to be told here. There is just a family resemblance: 'aware of' is an expression that tracks the human ability to 'make cognitive contact' with different parts of the world. On this last view, while each object-relative use of 'aware of' refers to a world-implicating relation, each specific world-implicating relation may be fundamentally different from the others and related only by way of resemblance.

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