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A SARTREAN CRITIQUE OF
INTROSPECTION

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I

Sartre draws a sharp distinction between *consciousness*, on the one hand, and *inner sense* or *knowledge of (it)self*, on the other: '*La conscience n'est pas un mode de connaissance particulier, appelé sens intime ou connaissance de soi*' (B& N: 7). I would like to explore the meaning of the terms involved in that distinction with a view to highlight its significance. My analysis 'departs' from Sartre's argumentation, in both senses of that verb: it takes Sartre's own thesis as the guiding principle of the ensuing analysis, yet it employs that analysis on a set of views that are not addressed in Sartre's own corpus. What makes those views relevant to our discussion, is that they model consciousness on knowledge of (it)self, and they think of the latter as delivered by the exercise of inner sense. My discussion will be brief and, I hope, to the point. I will argue that contemporary attempts to revive an inner sense approach to knowledge of (it)self encounter serious difficulties; they thus fail to articulate a viable alternative to the Sartrean approach to consciousness. But first, let me clarify a few terminological issues.

II

The two notions contrasted with consciousness are *sens intime* and *conscience de soi*. Hazel Barnes renders those terms correspondingly as 'inner meaning' and 'self-knowledge' (B& N: 7). The translation of *sens* as 'meaning' is erroneous because the context of Sartre's discussion is not semantic but epistemic. In the particular section where the phrase occurs, Sartre is at pains to distinguish *conscience* from inward directed *connaissance*, whether it is called '*sens intime ou connaissance de soi*'. *Sens intime*, therefore, identifies not a type of meaning but a mode of 'particular knowledge' (*connaissance particulier*). Other renderings of *sens intime* may include 'intimate sense' or 'innermost sense'. However, given that Sartre's turn of phrase indicates that

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his main target is how *sens intime* has been employed in the philosophical tradition for modelling *conscience* onto *connaissance*, and that the relevant term for that kind of modelling in the English philosophical tradition is 'inner sense,' I have opted for that translation of *sens intime*. 'Inner sense,' along with 'internal sense,' and 'internal observation,' is a term widely employed in defence of introspectionist accounts of one's awareness of oneself, and our discussion will accordingly be placed under the heading of a general critique to the introspectionist view of self-awareness.¹

Regarding *connaissance de soi*, it is advisable to adopt a translation that retains the ambiguity of the original construction of the French phrase, which may denote either (i) a cognitive state's knowledge of itself, or (ii) knowledge of a thing called 'the self'.² 'Knowledge of (it)self' is probably the right candidate, but I shall also be employing the more common 'self-knowledge' when the context of our discussion makes clear whether it refers to consciousness' cognition of its activity, or to one's knowledge of one's self.

Finally: *conscience*. The term means 'consciousness' but it is worth noting that in Sartre's own system of thinking, as well as in that of some of his opponents, consciousness comes with a dimension of self-consciousness. The issue that divides them is primarily how, if at all, self-consciousness is involved in the ordinary consciousness of the world. Sartre's opponents (as presented by Sartre) affirm that consciousness' awareness of itself is necessarily governed by a subject-object duality characteristic of the perceiving/perceived or of the knowing/known relations. For Sartre, on the other hand, the attribution of such duality misrepresents the character of consciousness' awareness of itself, since, in the vast majority of conscious activities in our ordinary engagement with reality, consciousness is simply (non-positionally) conscious of itself being (positionally) consciousness of its intentional object.

For Sartre, the question of self-consciousness is never far removed from the discussion over the nature of consciousness as such; and given that a prominent account of self-consciousness treats it as an instance of self-knowledge, and that the latter is considered as supplied by the exercise of some kind of introspective faculty, a defence of the Sartrean approach goes hand in hand with a critique of the 'inner sense or self-knowledge' model of consciousness. And that critique is what we shall pursue in the following three sections.

III

Introspectionism can be introduced through a simple line of reasoning: if we are to be aware of ourselves, there has to exist some way in which we are able to somehow look at, tune in to, or be acquainted with what goes on inside us; let's call that, whatever it happens to be, 'introspection'.

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That line of reasoning might sound reasonable, but its apparent cogency owes a lot to its lack of specificity: so generally put, 'introspection' is not the answer to a philosophical call for the analysis of self-awareness, but a convenient name for the phenomenon we try to understand.

We might make some progress by invoking etymology: coming from the Latin word *introspicere*, 'introspecting' denotes the activity of 'looking inside'. According to the perceptual (mainly, visual) model of introspection, our access to our own current mental states is to be conceived on the model of sense-perception, differing from other perceptual activities only by its purported destination, i.e. by the fact that it is directed inwards rather than outwards. Contemporary accounts of introspection present it as a highly-reliable perceptual faculty that delivers reports on current mental states, which can exist independently of being noted by, or reported to their owner. By employing introspection, the subject receives direct information about his present mental states and correctly identifies the occurrence and character of those states on the basis of how they appear to him from the inside.

Along with the standard accounts come the standard criticisms, which focus mostly on the implausibility of the introspectionist idea of having sense-experience of our current mental states. If introspection were exactly like perception then our awareness of ourselves would be in some important respects exactly like sense-experience of perceptible objects. Yet, the criticism goes, no one can take seriously the view that we are aware of our own thoughts by having sensations or quasi-sense-experiences of them, or that in being aware of a sensation, such as a tickle or a pain, we have yet another sensation or experience that is 'of' the first one, and constitutes its appearing perceptually to us in a particular way.³

Those criticisms against introspectionism appear to me cogent, not only in the case of our awareness of belief states, where postulating sense-experiences of them sounds rather far-fetched,⁴ but also in the case of our awareness of our sensations. Assuming that pain is essentially a sensation, we do not experience pain by having a sensation of a pain sensation: we just have a pain sensation. And when we suffer a headache we do not have a sense-experience of our experience of headache. Denying that claim would commit one to a choice between two doubtful claims: either that the headache and its perceptual awareness belong to different kinds of sensation, and we therefore become aware of our headache by the seeing, hearing, listening, touching, or tasting of it; or that the headache and its awareness are of the same kind, and therefore that we become aware of it by having a headache *of* our headache (a toothache *of* our toothache, etc.). Given the implausibility of those claims, it is, I believe, reasonable to conclude that the notion of 'inner sense' gives us the wrong picture of ordinary self-awareness.

However, those criticisms appear to me to leave themselves open to a simple counter-argument on behalf of the introspectionist. Showing that

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sense experience, of any sort, is not involved in awareness of our mental states does not amount to a rebuttal of introspectionism, unless it is independently established that perceiving something requires having a sense-experience of it. If the alleged sensation-intermediaries between the perceiver and the perceived are but an obsolete commitment of a problematic theory of perception, the introspectionist may hold on to the perceptual model of inner awareness without having to articulate convincing responses to the above mentioned criticisms.

It is at this point, I think, that the Sartrean approach can move the dialectic forward by explaining why the introspectionist account is misguided, whatever view about the role of sensation in perception one happens to uphold. Sartre's analysis of perception provides adequate material for blocking the inner-sense theory of self-awareness. In particular, Sartre's phenomenological account of perceiving an object, *in contrast to* merely thinking of it or imagining it, identifies certain characteristics of the relevant experience that are not applicable to our awareness of current mental states. In the next section I give a *précis* of the Sartrean account of seeing an object, followed by a list of reasons as to why the perceptual model of introspection cannot succeed in the case of self-awareness of our own belief-states. In section V, we shall explore how these considerations bear upon the introspectionist account of sensation-states.

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IV

Can we refute the introspectionist model without appealing to sense-impressions? Is it actually possible to establish that perception is not the way we become aware of our mental states, whatever theory about the *nature* of perception one happens to hold? The answer I think is yes. I shall attempt to justify my thesis by drawing on the minimal requirements for visual perceptual experience – requirements extrapolated by attending to some basic facts about the *phenomenology* of perception. The level at which my argument moves is descriptive not explanatory. The facts to which I appeal, as articulated by Sartre in *The Imaginary* (IPPI: 8–11, 112–22), are quite basic and hardly controversial. Yet, they highlight some crucial disanalogies between perceiving on the one hand, and being aware of occurrent belief states, on the other.

The contrast to be drawn here concerns a perceptible object, such as a cube, and a mental occurrence with propositional content of the form expressed in (what the defenders of introspectionism take as an uncontroversial case) the avowal of one's own belief.

Perception is a conscious act that intends its object always in a specific way: the object appears from a particular angle and at a certain distance, showing itself in this or that particular manner. Although, in the multitude of our perceptual experiences of some object, what is revealed to us in

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profiles is the selfsame object, the particular way the object appears to us, at each moment, might differ according to the standpoint we occupy relative to that object. The difference here can be identified as a difference in the content of the various experiences of the same object. My perception of an object is partial: only one part of the object is directly given to me at any moment. The other sides are given, as non-currently-visible, yet they are part of what I experience: what I experience is the object. Each *side* is given under different perspectives: the side is given differently to me if I hold the cube straight before me at eye level or if it is three yards away, at the left hand side of my visual field. An *aspect* signifies the way in which the sides are given in each *profile* i.e. in the temporary individuated presentation of an object. The object is given to me in a manifold of profiles. The identity of the object is given through these manifolds, but it is not another side, or aspect of the object: the cube is not another aspect of itself. Perception is directedness beyond what is strictly registered in sensation. Although only one aspect of the cube is exhibited in my sense-experience, I take myself to perceive a three-dimensional thing with hidden sides because of the *empty intentions* directed at them. Perception is always ad-perception. Perceiving something involves appreciating various matters about that thing that go beyond what is directly registered in the sense-experience (see B& N: 2–4).

For those reasons, Sartre insists, one cannot immediately capture an object in perception (as one does in thinking or in conceiving something): one has to *learn* an object, and to achieve that, one has to make (sometimes literally) a tour of it (IPPI: 8). Furthermore every perception is a particular view of one segment of the world. It is not the case that I see e.g. a pen and then you add other things next to it or under it so as to give it a context. What I immediately see is a complex of objects out of which I focus on one of them. Perceiving is, in that sense, the seizing of something from out of a set of objects that are co-given. I do not see a pen and then I think: ‘Let’s put a desk under it, and add a wall behind the desk, and put a book next to the pen’. Instead I take in the scene as a whole and my perceiving of the pen is made in the light of the background of those other objects. Finally – and rather crucially for our discussion – the awareness of those other objects is not *mediated by* or *inferred from* facts about the object on which I focus.

I submit that none of the above features characterizes belief-states, or any other (propositionally) contentful mental occurrence, expressed in, or (as the introspectionist would have it: reported by) an avowal. *My belief* that I see a pen on my desk (as opposed to the perceptible pen, or the desk) is not adumbrated.⁵ The belief itself does not present itself to me in one side: there is no back and front to it, no hidden sides that will come to view if I turn it around, or if I change position so as to make a mental tour of it. Furthermore, awareness of *my belief that* ‘I see a pen on my desk’ does not spring to appearance surrounded by other beliefs of mine, lying behind or next to it. Note that this fact does not commit us to an atomism or

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individualism about the content of our beliefs – it is not, in other words a semantic or conceptual claim to the effect that each belief may stand on its own. The claim is of phenomenological nature: while focusing on *my belief that I see a pen on my desk*, there are no other beliefs surrounding it. If, in trying to explore my belief, I start drawing connections, thinking of various others of my beliefs – such as my belief about fovea movements, or my belief about the rules that govern human communication, or my belief about the changing fashion in office furniture, or my belief about the mechanics of ink-flow, or my belief about the laws of gravity, etc., *my belief that I see a pen on my desk* is no longer present – if it becomes so, it is because I just brought it back to the centre of my attention. All that is in sharp contrast, phenomenologically, with the perceiving of the pen which implicates directly (and non-inferentially) not only the facing side of the pen, but also its underside, the desk-surface on which the pen lies, the book adjacent to it, etc.

The above considerations provide some solid phenomenological support for the claim that the awareness of an occurrent belief state cannot be cast on the perceptual model of introspection. But this does not mark an end to the debate. Even if the introspectionist admits to the phenomenological incongruence of conceiving of the awareness of propositionally contentful mental states, as an instance of perceiving inwards, he may wish to apply his ‘inner-sense’ theory to the domain of phenomenal states, such as pains, thrills, aches, tickles, or other sensations. In the following section I consider a subtle way of pursuing this introspectionist line, and I explicate why, in my view, it encounters some formidable phenomenological problems.

V

We saw in section III that an important criticism directed against introspectionism is that it entails the implausible claim that we are aware of our sensation or sensory experience, by having yet another sensation or sensory experience that is of the first one. The introspectionist may attempt to respond to that criticism by maintaining that we can introspect our phenomenal states without having a sensation of them.

According to an important recent proposal, a subject introspects her sensations or, in general, any of her phenomenal states, by demonstrative attention to the content of the relevant experience (Gertler 2001).⁶ Introspection of a phenomenal state involves referring to it with *pure* demonstrative, which, in contrast to a *perceptual* demonstrative, requires neither a descriptive content, nor a causal link with its referent. This new introspectionist account is happy to admit that we do not, literally speaking, perceive our own sensations; but this admission does not mar the account, since (its defenders may argue) demonstrative reference, achieved through attention alone, is *not* perceptual.

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What the new account offers is an analysis of introspection in terms of attention. Its main claim is that we come to know, or at least, that we become aware of our phenomenal states by employing the faculty of attention. But is attention the right candidate for explicating introspection? The answer according to some introspectionists is ‘yes, by default’: all explanations must come to an end somewhere; the demonstrative attention account’s explanatory bedrock is the notion of pure attention; and – according to that line of reasoning – the notion of attention itself is unanalysable.⁷

What the account offers is an analysis of introspection in terms of attention. Employing attention is a pervasive feature of our life; attending to someone or something is a more or less constant element of our conscious engagement with the world; it is not only reasonable to expect that attention is available when we turn our mental eye inwards; it would perhaps be unreasonable to think that our inner world is off limits to attentive observation.

And yet, I think that this account is incorrect. It is incorrect because it is based on an incorrect view of attention. It assumes that attention is another source of information at our disposal, next to seeing, touching, smelling, or thinking. But attention is not some kind of faculty alongside those others – rather it is a *modality* of sensory, perceptual, or intellectual faculties.

Attention is what makes observing different from merely seeing, what turns hearing into listening. We do not have the perceptual faculty of hearing sound and another faculty of attention, such that when we put the two together we get another faculty – that of listening to sound. We do not switch sources of information about anything when, from hearing someone talking, we begin listening to him. In my opinion, attention concerns the active involvement on the part of the subject in the processing of information. Attention is not a separate source of becoming knowledgeable, informed or aware of anything, next to seeing, touching, remembering, or thinking (all of these can be done attentively or non-attentively); rather, attention denotes the subject’s being able to draw on information in a specific way.

To make clear how exactly the above points bear upon my critique of the demonstrative attention account, it might help to retrace, for a moment, the main steps of my argumentation. Introspection is thought to be a quasi-perceptual mechanism for gaining knowledge of our sensations or other phenomenal states. A classic objection to the perceptual model of introspection is that we have no sense impressions of our phenomenal states. The response comes from the introspectionist that sense impressions are not required for introspecting phenomenal states – attention does not involve sense impressions, and attention is all that it takes for acquiring information, or becoming aware of, or getting knowledge about our phenomenal states. I argued that this response is not credible because it takes

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attention to be a source of information, whereas attention is rather the way in which a source of information is acted out: it signifies a modality of perceptual or intellectual activities not an activity in its own right.

To see this point in a bit more detail, consider one of the major accounts of attention as a kind of *faculty* or *resource*, an account that has been very influential in recent discussions over the nature of self-knowledge, and to which my Sartrean approach is opposed. Here is a telling paragraph:

there is a single, general kind of attention of which perceptual and sensational attention and conscious thought and imagination are all subspecies ... It is a familiar truth about attention that any one of these kinds of attention can interrupt any one of the others. Perceptual attention can be interrupted by conscious thought; conscious thought can be interrupted by external events which capture the thinker's attention; either of these two subspecies of the occupation of attention can be interrupted by imagination; and so on. What we have here is ... apparently some form of competition for the exclusive use of a limited single *faculty* of attention ... The familiar facts about attention are explained if there is a single, suitably high-level *resource*, drawn upon by either perception, conscious thought, or imagination.

(Peacocke 1998: 66, emphasis added)⁸

What we get in the above extract is a picture of our mental terrain, according to which there is a faculty or resource of attention, and the other faculties are competing with each other so as to get its – *attention*. Taken literally, the above theory maintains that our usual (sensual, perceptual, cogitative, etc.) faculties are trying to draw the attention of the faculty of attention.

I submit that this is a counter-intuitive result; it sounds strange, to my ears, to claim that certain faculties or activities try to win the attention of attention. And the best way to avoid that strangeness is to think simply of the relevant (sensual, perceptual, cogitative, etc.) activities as done *attentively* or *non-attentively*. Take the case of visual perception. Seeing done attentively involves foveating a particular object, 'zooming in on' the object, as we say. This is usually done not by physically bringing the object forward, but by excluding from our seeing other portions of our visual field. To attend to an object is to reduce what we may call the perceptual noise surrounding it; but this reduction of distraction is always necessarily relative to the (sensual, perceptual, cogitative) activity through which one is conscious of the object. We can only attend in sight, or in hearing, or in tasting, or in touching; we can never just *attend*.

The bearing of the above for our discussion is that attention is the wrong candidate for substituting the perceptual model of introspection of the

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phenomenal states – not because the perceptual model of introspection is the correct answer, but because there is no attention as such, independently of the activity or exercise of the faculty, which the term ‘attentively’ qualifies.

VI

Sartre claimed that neither ‘inner sense’ nor ‘knowledge of (it)self’ gives us the right measure for conscious awareness. Introspectionist accounts of how we become aware of our mental states run counter to Sartre’s claim. I attempted to substantiate the Sartrean approach to that issue, partly by invoking Sartre’s phenomenology of perceptual experience (sections III and IV) and partly by elaborating on his critique of faculty psychology so as to achieve a more accurate and conceptually less muddled view of attention (section V). Pointing to the serious inadequacies of the introspectionist model should facilitate the reading of the relevant sections of Sartre’s work. My critique of some currently popular ‘inner-sense’ accounts of self-awareness aimed, *inter alia*, to clear the way for an unprejudiced interpretation of Sartre’s text. However, it is worth noting again that the text we examined is near the beginning of *Being and Nothingness*; a proper understanding and appreciation of Sartre’s rich theory of consciousness begins, rather than ends, with the issues we explored in this paper.

Notes

- 1 On ‘inner sense’ see Russell 1912: 51, 1921: 5; Armstrong 1968: 95, 337; and more recently, Byrne 2005, forthcoming. The term ‘internal sense’ is employed from the heyday of British empiricism to the present: see Locke 2008 [1690]: Bk 2, ch. 1, §4; Mellor 1978: 55. See finally John Stuart Mill’s important defence of introspection through a discussion of ‘internal observation’ in 1961 [1865].
- 2 To be exact, both of those interpretations should be distinguished from yet another, which refers to (iii) one’s knowledge of oneself *as* oneself; for further discussion see Hatzimoysis (forthcoming).
- 3 See Shoemaker 1994 for a classic statement of that critique and Moran 2001 for an important development; see also Bar-On 2004 for a critical exposition of the relevant debate.
- 4 Yet, see Goldman 1993 for the claim that we come to know of what we believe by the sensory or phenomenal qualities of our belief states, and Robinson 2005 for a detailed – and, to my mind, convincing – response.
- 5 For Sartre’s use of the notion of *Abschattung* as applied to perceptual awareness of things in the world, see B& N: 3. Regarding my choice of example for illustrating the contrast between an object perceived and a mental state avowed, it could be objected that statements which involve the expression ‘I see ...’ may not count as avowals, since they are not statements about facts to which we have privileged access, while they are subject to various epistemic errors from which proper avowals are supposedly immune. Thus, it would be better to state ‘It visually appears to me that ...’. However, that objection is not relevant at this

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- point: what matters for our discussion is ‘my *belief that I see ...*’, to which, according to introspectionists, we do enjoy privileged access. On the notion of ‘privileged access’ see Ram Neta’s careful discussion in his forthcoming article.
- 6 See also Gertler forthcoming for a critique of some alternative introspectionist, as well as rationalist, accounts of self-knowledge. It should be noted that I refer to Gertler’s insightful work as a source on which the introspectionist would do well to draw, in order to respond to the Sartrean criticism; this does not entail that Gertler herself would wish to commit her position to the broader introspectionist cause, or that her overall position on phenomenal self-knowledge should be construed as a move in the dialectic I am describing.
- 7 Gertler puts the point very nicely: ‘Every account rests on some unanalyzed notions ... The demonstrative attention account gains support from the claim that “attention” is unanalyzable. For surely it is a virtue of a theory ... that its explanatory bedrock is actually unanalyzable’ (2001: 318–19).
- 8 For a recent employment of Peacocke’s approach, see insightful discussion of deliberation in Owens forthcoming.

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