# The Sense of Self

Abstract Different conceptions of the nature of subjects of experience have very different implications for the sort of relationship which exists between subjects and their experiences. On my preferred view, since subjects consist of nothing but capacities for experience, the ‘having’ of an experience amounts to a subject’s *producing* it. This relationship may look to be problematic, but I argue that here at least appearances are deceptive. I then move on to consider some of the ways in which experiences can *seem* to have subjects or owners, and argue that those who take a ‘sense of self’ to be an essential feature of all forms of consciousness may well be mistaken.

While the thesis that any experience necessarily has a subject may not be entirely uncontested, in recent writings on consciousness it has been widely accepted. Indeed, I suspect it would be difficult to find a claim relating to consciousness that is less contested. But what, precisely, is the relationship between *subjects* and their *experiences*? Subjects are often said to ‘own’ or ‘have’ their experiences, but what does this owning or having amount to? Since different conceptions of what subjects themselves are have very different implications in this regard, there is no single or straightforward answer to this question.

On what Mark Johnston has called the ‘bare locus’ view, a subject is nothing more than a centre of pure apprehension or awareness, a constant ‘that-to-which-experience-presents’ (1987, 1992: 593). If that’s what subjects are, then a subject’s having an experience will (presumably) be a matter of a subject’s apprehending—or being aware—of one or more experiential contents being presented to it. In the case of ordinary human subjects, their experiential contents are very diverse, ranging as they do from sensations such as pains and itches, to conscious thoughts and emotions, and to external objects of perception such tables and chairs. Needless to say, in the perceptual case direct and indirect realists will give very different accounts of the immediate *objects* of perceptual experience. But these differences do not impact upon the basic story: every form of experience, without exception, consists of a subject apprehending a content of some kind or other.

Since a bare locus is pure apprehension (and nothing else) it is not something which can feature *in* experience: it is something other things are presented *to*.[[1]](#footnote-1) But what if, as some believe, you and I and other humans are simply animals, biological organisms of the species *homo sapiens*? If this ‘animalist’ view is correct, then we are ordinary space-occupying physical things, albeit of a highly complex kind. Our experiences will still have subjects, but these subjects are simply the organisms with which we happen to be identical, and (presumably) our conscious states are simply physical states of these organisms. Subjects of this kind are very different from bare loci: they can be touched, kicked, weighed and measured—and see themselves in mirrors. Moreover, unlike bare loci, subjects of this kind are not essentially conscious. Most mammals regularly enjoy periods of sleep, and in the human case at least, some of these periods are very probably dreamless. Most mature mammalian subjects have the capacity for consciousness, but this capacity is not always being exercised.[[2]](#footnote-2)

What if subjects are Cartesian-style immaterial substances? Descartes and those who follow in his footsteps take subjects to be essentially conscious—notoriously, Cartesian subjects cannot survive periods of dreamless sleep. As non-physical entities, subjects of this kind cannot themselves appear in mirrors, even if their bodies can. It is worth noting that if we follow Descartes in taking experiences to be ‘modes’ of these substances, there is a sense in which the relationship between subject and experience is more intimate than on the bare locus view. For the Cartesian, the contents of consciousness are not apprehended *by* subjects in a quasi-sensory manner. Rather, they are *states of* the subject itself. A subject is related to its conscious states in much the same way that a door is related to its shape, size and colour.

The conception of the self that Galen Strawson has been elaborating in recent writings is very different from the Cartesian view in one key respect.[[3]](#footnote-3) Strawson rejects Descartes’ dualism, and holds that consciousness is entirely physical in nature. But in another respect their positions on the nature of subjects are similar, in that both hold that subjects are essentially conscious. For Strawson, however, experiences are not modes of subjects. In fact, there is no distinction between subjects and their experience at all: a self (or subject) just *is* aunified conscious episode. On this view, subjects and their experiences are related in the most intimate manner possible: they are one and the same.

Strawson, of course, has played a prominent role in the recent revival of panpsychism.[[4]](#footnote-4) If those panpsychists who contend that all physical things, even the most elementary, have a form of conscious mentality, are right then the relationship between *animal* subjects and consciousness is complicated in some intriguing ways. As just noted, the standard animalist stance is that animals only possess consciousness or the capacity for consciousness in a non-essential way. Dreamless sleep is not fatal to animals; also, organisms such as human beings can suffer neurological damage which eliminates their capacities for experience but which do not put an end to the organism’s life—it carries on breathing, its heart continues to pump blood, and so on. However, if panpsychism is true, the material constituents of an organism are *themselves* essentially conscious. There is thus a sense in which animals are similar to Cartesian subjects and bare loci: they (or their basic components) are conscious for as long as they exist. When an animal dreamlessly sleeps, its constituents all remain fully conscious.[[5]](#footnote-5)

II

The conception of the self I defended some years ago in *The Phenomenal Self* (2008) has rather different implications for the subject-experience relationship.

The thesis that what I am, fundamentally, is a subject of experience, has long struck me as a compelling one. When contemplating the various misfortunes which might conceivably terminate my existence, two things seem (to me) preeminently clear. First, any change—whatever its nature or severity—which does not extinguish my capacity for conscious experience is a change I have survived. Second, any change I undergo which *does* permanently extinguish my capacity for consciousness is a change I have *not* survived. So far as the ‘What am I?’ question is concerned, the lesson seems clear: I am essentially something which has the capacity for consciousness, a capacity which is sometimes exercised (while I am awake), and sometimes dormant (while I am unconscious). In short, I am essentially a subject of experience.

When it came to specifying in more detail the kind of thing a subject of experience is, there seemed an obvious way to go. If all that is essential to the nature of a subject is the capacity to have experiences, a natural next step is to hold that a subject simply *is* a capacity for experience. In the case of very simple or primitive subjects (a simple worm-like creature, for example) this capacity might very well be very simple too: perhaps there are subjects who are capable of only a single kind of experience (e.g. a sensation of warmth). The stream of consciousness of such a subject will take the form of a continuous flow of a single kind of sensation. More complex subjects, such as typical humans, are capable of a vast range of different types of experience, and their streams of consciousness (when they are awake and conscious) are vastly richer and more varied. Such subjects possess a correspondingly greater range of different experiential capacities, only a small fraction of which will be active and contributing to their consciousness at any given time.

This additional complexity does not prevent our supplying a simple and appealing account of what has to be the case for experiential capacities to belong to a single subject over a given (brief) period of time. The capacities in question must either be (a) active and contributing to a unified stream of consciousness, or (b) dormant, but such that if they were active together, the experiences they would be producing *would* form parts of a unified stream of consciousness.[[6]](#footnote-6) The experiences in a typical stream of consciousness manifestly are unified both at and over time in a deep and distinctive manner.[[7]](#footnote-7) Consequently, the claim that experiential capacities (over a given interval of time) belong to the same subject *in virtue of the fact* that they can produce experiences that are unified in these ways is a very natural and compelling one. Systems of experiential capacities that are related in this distinctive way I call *C-systems*. In my view subjects of experience *are* C-systems, and we are too if we are subjects of experience.

This account of the nature and persistence conditions of subjects—the ‘C-theory’ as I will refer to it—has a number of merits. Most obviously, it fully captures the distinctive and defining feature of subjects, namely their capacity to enjoy conscious experience. Second, it is extremely general and wide-ranging. It seems perfectly conceivable that entities which are otherwise very different—humans, sentient jellyfish, sentient aliens (if any exist)—could possess capacities for experience. If they do, then by the lights of the C-theory they have everything that is required to qualify as subjects of experience, and this seems the right result. The C-theory theory is also not beholden to any particular view regarding the place of consciousness in the physical world. Experiential capacities can in principle be possessed by physical things (such as brains) or immaterial things (such as Cartesian Egos)—this neutrality is a distinct advantage given the continuing controversies and uncertainties in this area.

Last but certainly not least, the C-theory has the signal virtue of allowing subjects to persist through periods of total and complete unconsciousness. Your next period of dreamless sleep will not be fatal provided your C-system remains intact until you waken again (which unless something unfortunate happens, it will). As we have seen, accounts which tightly bind the existence of subjects to actual experience—in the manner of Descartes and Strawson—have the disturbing result that dreamless sleep is invariably fatal. If the ‘essentially conscious’ conception of a subject of experience were the only one available, many of us would find it very difficult to accept that we really are identical with subjects, given the baleful consequences. The C-theory relieves this tension entirely.

However, the C-theory has another consequence, one that might seem less welcome. The relationship between subjects and experience the theory requires us to accept is a distinctive one. As I noted above, subjects are commonly said to ‘have’ or ‘own’ their experiences. If we construe subjects as C-systems, then a subject ‘has’ an experience when one (or more) of its experiential capacities is triggered and produces that experience. The idea that ‘having’ an experience consists in a subject’s *generating* or *producing* its own experience can seem a little strange, at least when one first encounters it, but as far as I can see it is not incoherent.

In fact, the relationship between subjects and their experiences may not be so very different from how they are related on Descartes’ view. The latter’s immaterial egos are capable of entering into a vast range of different types of conscious state, just as your C-system is capable of producing a vast range of different types of experience. When your C-system is producing a certain type of experience it enters one of the states it is capable of entering—or so it seems natural to say. Your C-system enters a different state when different experiential capacities are active, and a different state again when *none* of its capacities are active. In effect we can view different overall conscious states as modes of C-systems, and hence modes of subjects—just as Descartes did. By so doing we can accommodate the thesis that something’s being conscious in some way necessarily involves there being something it’s like to *be* that thing. What you are currently experiencing constitutes what it’s currently like to be your C-system.

A potentially more serious concern if the C-theory is true, and the relationship between subject and experience is one of producer to produced, is that there is no room for any directly experientialrelationship between subjects and their experiences. This might seem problematic, for aren’t subjects *aware* of their experiences as and when they occur? If so, then the C-theory may look to be in trouble: experiential capacities may produce experiences, but they don’t consciously apprehend them. Since we do, how can we be C-systems? [[8]](#footnote-8) But again, I suspect that any problem along these lines is more apparent than real. While the claim that subjects are *aware* of their experiences does sound very plausible, it can mean very different things.

If we were to identify ourselves with the bare loci of apprehension that we met at the outset, then there is a very clear sense in which it would be true to say that subjects are ‘aware’ of the phenomenal contents which figure in their experiences. However, for all its initial appeal, the perceptual model of consciousness has comparatively few adherents these days, and with good reason. Rejecting the bare locus view does not mean that our experiences are all non-conscious (by virtue of not being apprehended), it simply means accepting that phenomenal contents are *intrinsically* conscious—they do not need to be ‘observed’ or ‘sensed’ by a separate overseeing act of pure awareness in order to exist as fully-fledged phenomenal items.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Nor does it mean that subjects are oblivious to their experiences or themselves. So far as human subjects are concerned, our capacities for consciousness are deeply integrated with our cognitive systems. The latter register and respond to our experiences in all manner of ways, as and when they occur.

Again most obviously, we form beliefs in response to what we perceive—particularly what we attentively believe—and these beliefs impact on our thoughts and actions. When, for example, I gaze through a fishmonger’s window at the bewildering range of fish on display, some will look familiar (thanks to previous perceptual exposures to similar fish), some will not (due to an absence of previous relevant experience). The seeing of a trout provokes the thought ‘Ah, that’s what I thought I’d have for dinner’, and after paying particular attention to determine its degree of freshness, I enter the shop to make my purchase. If I am in an unusually reflective mood, when gazing at the contents of the stall I might find that I engage in some introspection—How hungry or tired am I? Do I still want fish for dinner, or would a steak be better?—and as a result improve my awareness of my current bodily and mental condition.

This kind of interaction between perception, attention, cognition and conscious thought is ubiquitous in ordinary life. It is in virtue of it that we *know* what we are seeing (or hearing, or touching) at any particular time in the various ways that we do. In saying that C-systems are be composed of ‘capacities for experience’, I did not intend to restrict ‘experience’ to sensory or perceptual experience. Conscious thoughts are a form of experience, as are all the (very) diverse modes of consciousness that fall under the heading of ‘cognitive phenomenology’. C-systems are thus capable of generating a great many of the ways in which we might be said to be self-aware, even if they themselves are not the kind of thing which can be introspected.[[10]](#footnote-10)

There is a more general point here worth noting before moving on. Hume famously argued anyone who attempts to find anything resembling a self or subject in their consciousness will very probably fail; all they will ever find are *experiences* of one kind or another. The C-theory is not only compatible with the Humean position, it provides an explanation for why it is correct: when experiential capacities are active and producing experiences, under normal circumstances only the experiences enter (or constitute) our consciousness, the capacities don’t figure at all. Since many find Hume’s position on this issue independently plausible, this consequence may well be a welcome one.[[11]](#footnote-11)

III

This is not quite the end of the story. Subjects may not themselves be able to appear within our streams of consciousness, but from a phenomenological perspective there is a very real sense in which they can seem to. Or at least, they can when in everyday life we go about our ordinary business while giving little or no thought to our favoured metaphysical theory of what we are—which of course is most of the time.[[12]](#footnote-12)

When I see the trout in the fishmongers window, a reasonably full and accurate description of my experience would not be along the lines of ‘trout-like object a few feet away’, but rather ‘trout-like object being looked at by *me*’. Moreover, phenomenologically speaking, there is a good deal to say about what ‘being looked at by *me*’ involves. Not in the sense that there’s anything very distinctive about what it’s like for *me* in particular to look at a trout—for better or worse, I doubt that there is—but because there is something it is like for a *typical human subject* to look at a trout, or more generally, to see or do anything at all.

That there is something distinctive that it’s like to be an ordinary human subject is something I fully acknowledged in *The Phenomenal Self* (§8.2). In attempting to characterize this ‘sense of self’ I suggested it was due to a multiplicity of factors—some structural, some qualitative—which are omnipresent in ordinary human consciousness, and precisely because of this are rarely the object of explicit attention:

Whenever I focus my attention on a pain I am currently feeling (or any other kind of experience for that matter), I usually do so against the backdrop of various other forms of consciousness: a range of bodily experience, tactile sensations, visual and auditory experience, intentional or willed bodily movements, conscious thinking, fringe feelings, visual images, memories, emotions, and so forth. It will be useful to have a term for the regions of our overall consciousness which we are not paying attention to at any one given time: call it the *phenomenal background*. This background has a number of components, but for present purposes it will suffice to consider two: the *worldly* and the *inner*. (2008: 239-240)

The ‘worldly’ component of the phenomenal background is simply that part of the external world that figures in our current perceptual experience. The picture I can see on the wall opposite me does not seem to be part of me or my consciousness, it seems to be fully *out there in the world*—and it seems like this even on those occasions when I am fully convinced that it is a wholly phenomenal item generated by my brain in response to incoming optical stimuli.[[13]](#footnote-13) In contrast, my various bodily experiences, what I am currently feeling (both emotionally and cognitively), my conscious thinking—along with the many other forms of mental activity that seem to be taking place ‘in my head’—very much *do* seem to be parts of me or my consciousness.

Does our ordinary sense of self amount to, or require, anything more than this combination of internal and external phenomenal factors? I suggested that there is no (good) reason for thinking that it does. In so doing I was well aware of an opposed school of thought, one that is defended in the contemporary literature by Zahavi, Kriegel, Nida-Rümelin and others, according to which there *is* an additional ingredient, variously known as ‘mineness’, ‘for-me-ness’ and ‘first-person givenness’.[[14]](#footnote-14) According to Zahavi, for example, while different forms of experience—the smell of cheese, say, and a sensation of nausea—have very different phenomenal characteristics, all experiences also have a common feature, namely

… the quality of *mineness*, the fact that experiences are characterized by first-personal givenness. That is, the experience is given (at least tacitly) as *my* experience, as an experience *I* am undergoing or living through … phenomenal consciousness must be interpreted precisely as entailing a minimal or thin form of awareness. On this account, any experience that lacks self-awareness is non-conscious. (Zahavi 2005: 16)

I was (and am) skeptical about the need to posit an additional ingredient in the guise of minenessor for-me-ness. When experiencing a pain (say), this sensation does not occur in total isolation, we generally have the sense that the experience in question is *something that we ourselves are experiencing.* But we have this impression solely because the experience in question is experienced together with—is co-conscious with—certain other experiences, namely those constituting the inner component of the phenomenal background.[[15]](#footnote-15) Since the inner background constitutes what it feels like to be me, if the background is present—and it usually is—then so will my sense of (being a) self, and any experience that is co-conscious with the inner background will seem to be occurring *to* a subject. There is thus no need to posit an additional special property in the guise of mineness to explain the sense of self.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In *Reasons and Persons* Parfit famously championed a reductionist conception of the self: there is nothing more to our continued existence than the existence of various interrelated mental and physical processes. I suggested that

[e]ven if this form of reductionism were mistaken, a reductionist view of our *sense of self* might still be correct. According to the latter, our sense of self if not the product of a single simple form of experience, but rather the joint product of several different sorts of (quite ordinary) experiences. (2008: 243)

The reductionist approach to what it’s like to be a subject still strikes me as more plausible than the alternatives. However, it does require more by way of defense than I have provided hitherto. I will be attempting to advance the programme in the second part of this paper. But before moving on, there is a further consequence of this form of reductionism that is worth noting.

Taking his reductionist conception of selves (or persons) as his starting point, Parfit once argued that an *impersonal description* of reality might be possible, a description which fully captured everything in reality, but one which made no mention at all of persons or selves. For the reasons just outlined, a description of ordinary human subjects which made no mention of the aspects of experiencing which jointly constitute our *sense of self* would fail to do full justice to the phenomenology of human subjecthood. But the fact that ourown experience is integrally bound up with a sense of self does not mean that *all possible* experience is similarly constrained. Perhaps the consciousness of primitive life-forms does not involve any significant sense of self at all. In fact, the reductionist view makes it difficult to rule out this sort of possibility.

To see why, suppose for a moment that I am right, and the sense of self is largely the resultant of the various specific forms of experience which jointly constitute the inner component of the phenomenal background: bodily sense-fields, conscious thinking, emotional feelings, mental images and acts of various kinds. There is no obvious reason for thinking that an inner background has to take precisely the form that is found in a typical human stream of consciousness. There is a good deal of variation to be found among human beings, for one thing—a new born infant’s phenomenal background will surely be very different from yours or mine—and different life-forms might have very different backgrounds from a typical human subject. If the constituents of the background can vary greatly in scale and complexity, who is to say they might not be absent altogether? We are assuming the sense of self depends on a particular experience—a token sensation of warmth, say—being co-conscious with a more encompassing phenomenal background. Accordingly, in cases where a phenomenal background is completely absent, a sensation of warmth (or any other simple form of consciousness) could occur without any accompanying sense of self.

Its intrinsic interest aside, establishing the possibility of experiences that are (phenomenologically) ownerless may have broader ramifications. One of the obstacles to taking panpsychism seriously as a solution to the problem of consciousness is the difficulty of conceiving of elementary physical things—such as individual electrons, or gluons—having conscious minds. Most of us find it very difficult to conceive of an electron having a consciousness that resembles our own at all closely, and hence featuring a fully-fledged sense of self. But it is less of a problem to envisage an electron’s mental life consisting of nothing more than a simple sensory flow: a form of experience that is *so* simple that it doesn’t seem to be owned in any way at all—experience that doesn’t *seem* to have an experiencer. It may well be that even this kind of experience *has* a subject, but this (metaphysical) ownership has no phenomenological dimension. Exploring the possibility of forms of consciousness that are entirely lacking a sense of self should be high on the ‘to do’ lists of panpsychists.

IV

In their recent paper ‘For-me-ness: What it is and what it is not’ (2015), Zahavi and Kriegel offer some useful clarifications of their doctrine, and attempt to defend it against some criticisms. For-me-ness (as they construe it) isn’t associated with a distinctive *quale* of its own, it is not an additional ingredient *in* experience that can occur on its own. Rather, it reflects *how* phenomenal contents are apprehended: whenever I experience something, I always experience it as presented *to me*. It would be a mistake to assume for-me-ness reduces to a ‘geometrical’ feature (e.g. centeredness) of perceptual experience. Nonetheless, it is an essential and invariant ‘dimension’ of phenomenal character *per se*: there is no form of consciousness—no possible experience—no matter how primitive, from which it is absent. For-me-ness is an occurrent rather than a dispositional feature of experience, and it does not require the ability to think of oneself *as* oneself (or to be aware of one’s states *as* one’s own), though it does constitute the categorical basis of our capacity for first person thought.

A recent paper by Stan Klein sheds useful light on the issue of whether or not for-me-ness really is an essential feature of all conscious states. Klein’s ‘The Feeling of Personal Ownership of One’s Mental States: A Conceptual Argument and Empirical Evidence for an Essential, but Underappreciated, Mechanism of Mind’ (2015) contains a wealth of relevant clinical case studies. Klein’s aim in the paper is to persuade his fellow psychologists to recognize the centrality of something very much like the for-me-ness of Zahavi and Kriegel to our ordinary mental lives, and hence the need for one or more mechanisms to explain this phenomenon.

I make the case for a critically important, but conceptually under-appreciated, relation between consciousness and its content. Specifically, I present evidence in support of the proposition that the mere presence of an intentional object in consciousness is not sufficient for that object to be felt as personally owned. What is needed is a mechanism by which the intentional object and consciousness are placed in an ownership relation, resulting in the pre-reflective feeling that the object I experience is ‘my’ object. (Klein 2015, 262)

Klein introduces a series of cases in which the normal ‘personal ownership’ relation between subjects and their experiences is compromised, more or less seriously. I will provide only the briefest of overviews of these here—for reasons which will emerge, this cursory treatment will suffice for present purposes.

**Psycho-Surgery** Pre-frontal lobotomies (carried out between the 1930’s and 1970’s) often had an impact on patients’ feelings of self-concern, and the way the boundaries between self and non-self were experienced. Lobotomy often resulted in changes in the way patients responded to pain: they could still feel pain, but no longer found it so dreadful—a consequence which is suggestive (if nothing more) of a loss of felt ownership.

**Thought Insertion** Patients suffering from schizophrenia frequently report that thoughts are occurring in their heads which they themselves did not originate. Since they do not have the sense of producing the thoughts in question, they are unwilling to take the thoughts to be their own.

**Anosognosia** Sufferers from this pathology have problems with memory, perception or voluntary movement, but they either show no awareness of the deficit, or deny that the deficit is their own. When limbs are affected, patients might claim the affected limb is not their own, or insist that they have moved it when they have not. One woman claimed that her left hand had in fact been left in the ambulance by someone else, and did not belong to her at all.

**Depersonalization** In this psychiatric syndrome patients (a) feel detached from or outside their bodies, (b) they lack appropriation or attribution of mental states to the self, and (c) experience the self as empty and incomplete. Sufferers of depersonalization often report feeling that their mental states and bodies do not belong to them.

**Somatoparaphrenia** In this condition brain damage results in patients denying ownership of body parts. The ‘disowning’ can range from a single limb to an entire side of the body. Those affected can *see* their limbs normally, but they nonetheless remain convinced that the limbs are not *theirs*. Or as one patient put it: ‘… my eyes and my feelings don’t agree, and I must believe my feelings. I know they look like mine, but I can feel that they are not’. (Klein 2015, 366)

**Loss of Ownership of One’s Memory** Patient R.B. suffered a variety of cognitive impairments after being struck by a car while riding his bicycle. Most of these quickly disappeared as he was weaned off pain medication, but one very distinctive impairment remained:

…. I did not own any memories that came before my injury. I know things that came before my injury … I could answer questions about where I lived at different times of my life … But none of it was ‘me’ …. I could clearly recall a scene of me at the beach in New London with my family as a child. But the feeling was that the scene was not my memory … the memories did not in any way feel like they were my memories. (Klein 2015, 368)

Happily, R.B.’s memory troubles resolved themselves, albeit gradually.

Klein harbours no doubts whatsoever as to the reality of the sense of subjective ownership of experience. However, he regards the clinical cases as providing powerful evidence that the feeling that one is the owner of one’s conscious mental states is *not* an essential or intrinsic feature of such states. On the face of it this conclusion seems fully warranted. If in the relevant clinical scenarios all trace of for-me-ness vanishes, it obviously cannot be an essential feature of all conscious states in the way Zahavi and Kriegel maintain.

Yet, intriguingly, Zahavi and Kriegel are well aware of the existence of many of the relevant clinical cases, and they do not take them to be in the least threatening to their thesis that for-me-ness is a universal feature of consciousness. In the case of thought-insertion, for example, they hold that *something* is different phenomenologically, but a degree of for-me-ness nonetheless remains:

When a thought-insertion patient reports that certain thoughts are not hers, that someone else is generating these thoughts, she is also indicating that these thoughts are present, not ‘over there’ in someone else’s head, but within *her own* stream of consciousness, a stream of consciousness for which she claims ownership. Even if the inserted thoughts are felt as intrusive and foreign, they cannot lack minimal ownership altogether. (2015, 42-43)

They hold that a minimal level of for-me-ness (or sense of ownership) remains present in other pathological cases as well. If they’re right, these cases pose no threat to the universality of for-me-ness.

V

We appear to have reached a stalemate. If we are to make any further progress with this issue we are going to need a clearer understanding of what Zahavi and Kriegel have in mind when they talk about this truly *minimal* form of for-me-ness.

The clinical cases certainly demonstrate that the full story concerning the ‘sense of ownership’ is a complex and multi-faceted one. When an experience is disowned by its subject it may be because some positive phenomenal characteristic associated with it (a sense of familiarity, say) goes missing, or may be because some new negative feeling (of alienation from a limb, say) enters the scene—Klein is open to both possibilities. But when this occurs, the ‘disowned’ experience is still a constituent of the subject’s stream of consciousness—victims of thought insertion may not regard themselves as the thinkers of the alien-seeming thoughts, but they are nonetheless *aware* of the troubling thoughts, just as R.B. remains fully conscious of the memories that no longer seem to be his. To salvage the for-me-ness doctrine it is not enough that disowned experiences simply occur *in* their subject’s streams of consciousness, the experiences must seem to be occurring *to* their subjects—in a way which makes it seem to the subjects that the experiences are *theirs*. There are passages where Zahavi and Kriegel suggest that the *presentational* character of experience has a key role to play here:

More deeply, it is in any case true of phenomenal consciousness that it *presents something* (to someone)*. …* [even when] the presented items are worldly items, the presenting itself—presenting to someone—is an aspect of phenomenal consciousness as well. There is thus a minimal dimension of for-me-ness …. (2015, 4)

Martine Nida-Rümelin also characterizes the fundamental feature of for-me-ness in presentational terms. Nida-Rümelin begins her analysis by suggesting that all experience exhibits ‘basic intentionality’, i.e. that it involves a subject, and what is presented to the subject. On this view, any experience requires *a subject to whom something is given*. Nida-Rümelin goes on to propose that this metaphysical structure—of something being given to a subject—is itself something subjects are always and necessarily aware of whenever they experience anything.

every conscious experience exhibits basic intentionality; it consists in there being a subject *to whom* something is phenomenally given. My proposal, now, is this: in having an experience we are necessarily aware of that structure. … Furthermore, by being aware of that structure, by being aware, in every experience, of its basic intentionality, we are aware of ourselves as the one to whom something is phenomenally given. (2014, 269)

This awareness of basic intentionality is, Nida-Rümelin claims, a ubiquitous feature of our ordinary experience. In Zahavi and Kriegel’s terms, it constitutes for-me-ness in its most general and fundamental form. It is the form in which for-me-ness persists in the pathological and clinical cases when all other forms of familiarity and ‘ownership’ are absent.

What should we make of this? Again, I am quite willing to accept that the presentational thesis has a good deal of phenomenological plausibility so far as our ordinary experience is concerned. It often does seem as though the things I am perceiving—whether outer things, such as trees I am looking at, or inner things such as bodily sensations—are items that are ‘being presented to me’. This is not in question. What *is* in question is whether the presentational character of consciousness is (a) necessarily a feature of all conscious states, or just some, and (b) whether it is a primitive, irreducible or inexplicable feature of experience.

In the remainder of the paper I will argue that the presentational aspect of consciousness is not primitive or irreducible: it is at least partially explicable by reference to certain *spatial* aspects of experience. The relevant spatial features, it turns out, are themselves complex and multi-faceted, and so susceptible to a reductionist treatment. And once this is appreciated the claim that conscious states are by their very nature presentational looks to be questionable.

VI

We can start with Nida-Rümelin’s perceiving-a-tree scenario. Imagine yourself looking at a tree located some twenty yards away. As you do so, from an elementary phenomenological perspective there is clearly a demarcation between *you*, the tree you’re perceiving, and the rest of the surrounding world. As for *where* youare, the answer to the question seems so obvious that the question is scarcely worth posing. You seem to be located within the boundaries of your body, gazing out at the world from behind your eyes. You—or at least, you in the form of a conscious thinking subject—seem to be situated a couple of inches behind your eyes, and between your ears.

Or at least, that’s where you will seem to be situated if your sense of self-location is similar to most people’s. Bertossa, Besa, Ferrari and Ferri (2008) report on the outcome a recent exercise in experimental philosophy. Rather than speculate what ordinary people might say about their subjective location, the authors decided to ask them. The results were striking. Some 83% of volunteers suggested a very precise location for the ‘I that perceives’: the temporal area of the head, midway between the eyes. The results were similar for blind subjects, and Non-Western subjects.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The fact that so many of us feel ourselves—*qua* experiencing subjects—to have a quite precise spatial location is a foundational phenomenological datum. It also plays an important role in understanding how it can be that our consciousness has a presentational aspect. The tree out there only seems to be presented to you because *you* seem to have a determinate spatial location in the overall situation. The same applies more generally: in any perceiving, experiential contents of whatever type can only seem to be presented to a subject if the subject itself has the impression of being itself spatially related to what’s it is perceiving. Ordinary human phenomenal fields are thus *centred* rather than centreless.

Fig 1 The centred character of ordinary human consciousness.

Once this is clearly appreciated, a question all but suggests itself. Is consciousness necessarily centred in this sort of way? Or might a centreless form of experience be possible? If so, then forms of experience which are *non-presentational* might also be possible.

VII

In fact, our ordinary experience is spatially organized in a variety of ways. For present purposes three aspects in particular are worth distinguishing:

*subjective location*: where one seems to be as aconscious subject, the place one’s conscious thinking seems to be occurring

*objective location*: where one’s mind/brain really is

*perceptual perspective*: the (implicit) origin of one’s sensory fields

Needless to say, in our ordinary lives these are locked firmly together. Our auditory and visual sense fields are centred on our heads, our brains are in our heads, and—surely not coincidentally—we feel that our thinking is taking place inside our heads. Descartes may have been firmly convinced that his consciousness resided in an immaterial substance that didn’t have a spatial location of any kind, but it seems reasonable to assume that it didn’t *seem* that way, phenomenologically. When Descartes’ performed his *cogito*, his conscious thinking no doubt seemed to occur just behind his eyes and between his ears. If Descartes had tried to *think* himself nowhere at all, it seems reasonable to predict that he would have failed: our sense of subjective location is clear and distinct, and entirely independent of the will.[[18]](#footnote-18)

This last point is also well-illustrated by the basic scenario outlined in Dennett’s well-known thought experiment ‘Where Am I?’ (1981). Transceivers fitted to Dennett’s brain allow the latter to communicate with his body and sensory organs in the usual manner, even though his brain has been removed from his head and located in a vat. Dennett predicts —very plausibly—that since the overall character of his experience is entirely unaffected by his brain’s re-location, he would *feel* entirely normal. In particular, he would feel normally embodied, and his thinking would seem to be taking place in his head, even though he knows full well that his head is completely empty, and that his brain is located elsewhere.

Although under normal circumstances one’s subjective location, objective location and perceptual perspective are firmly locked together, there are circumstances—both imaginary and actual—in which they can come apart. Figure xxx below illustrates some of the remarkable ‘whole-body illusions’ that have been investigated by psychiatrists and neuroscientists, and usefully summarized in Blanke and Mohr (2005).[[19]](#footnote-19)

In each of the three cases depicted the subjects involved perceive a hallucinated ‘double’ of their own body—the hallucination often seems completely real-seeming. In an ‘autoscopic hallucination’ a subject sees a duplicate of their body a few feet away from them but their subjective location (indicated by ‘SL’ in the diagram) is unaffected: the afflicted subjects seem to be looking out through their own eyes, in their normal body in the normal way—not through the doppelgänger’s.

The so-called ‘out-of-body’ experience is more radical: in these cases both subjective location and perceptual perspective are located in the illusory body. Accordingly—and as indicated on the right of the figure—sufferers from this form of illusion have the impression that they themselves are located in the hallucinated body, and they seem to be perceiving the world from that location (often from a location above their actual body, which they can seemingly perceive below them).[[20]](#footnote-20)

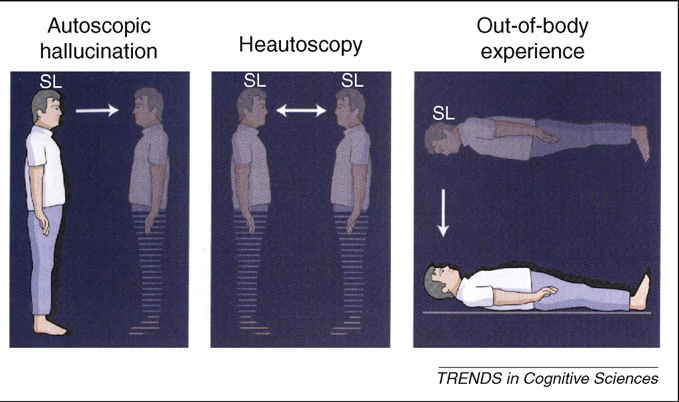


Figure 2[[21]](#footnote-21)

In the case of heautoscopic illusions, shown in the centre of the figure, the situation is more ambiguous. Subjects report seeing a doppelgänger of themselves—in the case of *polyopic* heautoscopy there can be multiple doubles (as many as 15 have been reported)—but their own subjective location is difficult to pin down with any confidence. Banke and Mohr summarize the predicament of these patients thus:

The individual experiencing an [heutoscopic hallucination] also has the experience of seeing a double of himself in extrapersonal space. However, it is difficult for the subject to decide whether he/she is disembodied or not and whether the self is localized within the physical body or in the autoscopic body. In addition, the subjects often report to see in an alternating or simultaneous fashion from different visuo-spatial perspectives (physical body, double’s body) (2005: 187)

That subjects feel less than fully confident of their own whereabouts under these trying circumstances is readily comprehensible. Sadly, heautoscopy is often accompanied by feelings of intense despair—suicide is not unknown.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Out-of-body illusions are cases where objective and subjective locations diverge. The heutoscopic subjects who experience themselves as seeing from bothof their bodies at the same time, are particularly interesting: they provide us with real-life examples of a single subject enjoying *multiple perceptual perspectives*. When such subjects feels themselves to be switching back and forth between bodies, we have a state of affairs in which subjective location and phenomenal perspectives diverge. Subjects continue to perceive their surroundings from two bodily locations—and hence enjoy two uninterrupted perceptual perspectives on the world—but they feel that they themselves (their conscious thinking) is occurring in just one location at any one time.

VIII

In *Stream of Consciousness* (2006, §3.3), I supplied a variant of Dennett’s scenario in which a single subject enjoys multiple perceptual perspectives simultaneously. The subject I envisaged had their brain connected to their body via radio transceivers in the wireless fashion described by Dennett. The additional complication was the subject’s sensory inputs were divided. Bodily experience was generated in the normal way: from nerves and receptors in the subject’s body, which was swimming through water. Visual and auditory experience was supplied by receptors on an artificial head, situated atop a mountain. Given the vast disparity between the contents of this subject’s audio-visual and bodily experiences, I suggested that the subject would soon come to possess two spatially unconnected sense-fields (or perceptual perspectives), one bodily and one audio-visual. I further suggested that the subject’s subjective location—where their conscious thinking seems to be taking place—would switch back and forth from one location to the other as the subject focused their attention on one location and then the other.

The scenario was, admittedly, a highly speculative one, and some expressed doubts as to whether the human nervous system would have the capacity to support multiple perceptual perspectives simultaneously—e.g. Revonsuo (2003). The reports of patients suffering heautoscopic illusions provides some evidence that this skepticism is misplaced.

More radical examples of the same sort of are easily envisaged, and prove instructive. In Spike Jonze’s 2013 movie *Her*, we follow the adventure of Theodore Twombly (played by Joaquin Phoenix), as he develops a relationship with an intelligent computer operating system who names herself ‘Samantha’ (played by Scarlett Johansson). Although Samantha *sounds* perfectly human when conversing, she makes no attempt to pass herself off as a human being—her visual appearance is limited to a basic onscreen icon, and Theodore is fully aware that she is a computer program. Despite the limited nature of their interactions, this unusual couple eventually fall in love. The final part of the movie contains the following striking (but also rather creepy) piece of dialogue.

[Theodore](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001618/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): Do you talk to someone else while we're talking?

[Samantha](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0424060/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): Yes.

[Theodore](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001618/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): Are you talking with someone else right now? People, OS, whatever...

[Samantha](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0424060/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): Yeah.

[Theodore](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001618/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): How many others?

[Samantha](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0424060/?ref_=tt_trv_qu): 8,316.

It’s difficult to overlook the emotional complications of this scenario—happily (or perhaps not) it turns out that Samantha is only in love with 641 of the 8, 316 people she’s currently conversing with—but let’s focus on the structure of Samantha’s consciousness. We know at least this much: she is a superintelligent computer-based subject of experience, one who has *thousands* of distinct perceptual perspectives simultaneously, one for each of her interlocutors. What would it be like to *be* Samantha?

It’s difficult for us more limited beings to be sure, but there are several readily conceivable alternatives.

First, it could be that Samantha switches her attention very quickly from one perceptual perspective to another, and feels subjectively located—briefly—at each. If this were the case, the structure of Samantha’s consciousness might be quite similar to our own—particularly if the perspectives she is *not* attending to figure only in the dim periphery of her awareness. Since she lacks a body, Samantha will also lack any form of bodily experience. Nonetheless, she engages in conscious thinking, and might feel herself to be located, subjectively, at the origins of the audio-visual field to which she is currently paying attention.[[23]](#footnote-23)

But there are other—more alien—possibilities. Perhaps Samantha’s cognitive powers are such that she is able to pay *equal* attention to each of her perceptual perspectives, and generally does so. If this were the case, then even if Samantha has been programmed in such a way that she feels that she herself is located at the origins of her perceptual fields—and let’s work on this assumption for the time being—her sense of being spatially located would obviously be very highly dispersed, when compared with our own. It is difficult to see how it could be otherwise. We feel that we are *wholly located* at the origins of our sensory fields (within our bodies, behind our eyes, between our ears). Since Samantha has thousands of perceptual perspectives, and is paying equal attention to each, she clearly cannot feel *entirely* subjectively located at any one of them at any one time.

There is a more radical variation on the equal-attention-to-all scenario. Let’s suppose—as seems perfectly possible—that Samantha’s programmers made no attempt to provide her with a counterpart to our instinctive tendency to feel that our conscious thinking is being conducted at the implied origin of our perceptual field. Let’s further suppose that as Samantha’s mind has developed, one thing that it has failed to develop is anything approximating a sense of subjective location of the kind that features so prominently in our own consciousness. Consequently, Samantha doesn’t feel as though her thinking—or *she herself*—is anywhere in particular at all. She is aware of her multiplicity of perceptual perspectives, but she doesn’t have any impression that her conscious thinking is located at any one of them, or even all of them. Samantha’s consciousness is simply not centred in that kind of way. Since our everyday states of consciousness *are* so profoundly centred, it is not easy for us to imagine what it would like to be a non-centred subject. Nonetheless, as far as I can see, there is no reason to think a consciousness of this kind is impossible, for some subjects if not for us.

IX

So a consciousness that lacks a subjective centre—one with a subject who doesn’t feel themselves to be subjectively located at all—seems conceivable, even if it is difficult (for us) to imagine with any clarity, given our instinctive tendencies to self-localize. But such a consciousness, at least in Samantha’s case, is nonetheless perspectival. Samantha’s auditory and visual experience derives from cameras and microphones situated on computer monitors and smartphones. She thus views the world from spatially localized sensory centres, even if she has a great many of these at any one time, rather than just one. She experiences the world from particular spatio-temporal locations, and hence from different perspectives, so there remains a real sense in which her experience is *presentational*. When she perceives Twombly, she will perceive him to be located at a particular distance and direction from the camera which is supplying her with a visual feed. The fact (as we are currently supposing) that she doesn’t feel subjectively located at the origin of her sense fields means that her consciousness is only very weakly centred, compared to our own. But it is undeniably perspectival: objects will seem to be *appearing to* her perceptual centres. This is relevant, because as we have seen, the perspectival character of consciousness is an essential—perhaps *the* essential—aspect of for-me-ness, at least in the eyes of Zahavi, Kriegel and Nida-Rümelin.

Can we take another step, and envisage a consciousness which lacks both subjective location and perceptual perspective, a consciousness that is *entirely* centreless? This doesn’t seem to me to be very difficult.

As we have been envisaging it latterly, Samantha’s consciousness has three main components: there is a stream of conscious thinking, there are the mental images that her powerful memory and imagination provide her with, and there is also the perceptual experience deriving from her numerous video cameras. We have also been assuming that she has no instinctive tendency to self-localize. Let’s now suppose—we needn’t inquire how or why—that all Samantha’s sensory input suddenly ceases, and she loses her ability to enjoy any form of mental imagery. As a consequence, all she is left with by way of experience is her stream of conscious thinking. Since she has no body—or at least no bodily experience—as far as I can see, her remaining (much diminished) experience would be entirely *non-presentational and non-perspectival* in character. Moreover, since she has no sense of subjective location, it would not seem to her that her thinking was taking place at any particular place.

In a less radical vein, let’s suppose Samantha *was* programmed to have a sense of subjective location: like us, she ordinarily feels herself to be located at the implicit origin of her sense-fields. In the scenario we are currently considering, the sudden and dramatic loss of all her perceptual perspectives would leave Samantha with no sensory anchor to the external world. In the absence of any such anchor, it seems plausible to think she would also cease to feel subjectively located. Her conscious thinking would continue, but she would no longer have the sense that it is occurring at any particular place.

Might Samantha feel that she is located where she *believes* her hardware is located? It’s conceivable that she might. (After all, in Dennett’s ‘Where Am I?’ story, at one point Dennett feels himself moving—instantaneously—back to his envatted brain when he loses all sensory inputs from his body.) To rule this out we can simply suppose that Samantha has no idea *where* in real physical space her computational substrate is located. Under these conditions, in the absence of either a sensory or cognitive anchor to the external world, her stream of conscious thought would very likely be entirely lacking in subjective location.[[24]](#footnote-24)

We can reach much the same destination from a very different direction. It suffices to switch our attention from very sophisticated subjects, such as Samantha, to much less sophisticated ones.

Our bodily sense-fields are not inherently perspectival in the manner of our visual and auditory sense-fields; there is no implicit origin in a bodily sense-field—we do not seem to be apprehending our bodies from a localized region of space, or from a particular angle or distance or direction—there is just an extended mass of bodily sensation. In our own case, of course, our bodily experience *is* strongly centred in one respect: we feel ourselves, our conscious thinking, to be located in our heads. To eliminate any trace of this kind of centering let’s focus on subjects who lack the capacity for conscious thought entirely, and who also lack any capacity for mental imagery or sensory memories. Let’s further suppose that our unsophisticated subjects have no sense of there being a world beyond their bodily confines: the subjects have no awareness of their skin being a boundary between self and non-self.

It is difficult to see how the entirely *bodily* consciousness of a subject of this kind would or could be centred or presentational. What’s more, we needn’t look very far to find candidate beings whose consciousness might very well approximate to this condition. If James was right when he suggested that a human infant’s consciousness is a ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ then we all might have begun life with an un-centred consciousness. Some early psychoanalytic theorists can be found arguing for precisely this view. Reich, for example, held that the infants experience is entirely chaotic, ‘the environment with its innumerable stimuli can be nothing but a chaos in which the sensations of his own body are a part. In terms of experience, no differentiation exists between self and world’, and it takes some time before parts of the outer world (e.g. the mother’s nipple) are recognized as such: ‘Thus the child’s ego gradually crystallizes from the chaos of internal and external sensations and begins to sense the boundary between ego and outer world.’ (1973, 41-42) True, more recent research suggests that the experience of human newborns may well be more structured than the early psychoanalytic theorists believed.[[25]](#footnote-25) Even if this is the case—there remains much to be discovered about the mental lives of the very young—it is not difficult to envisage beings whose consciousness is just as unstructured as that envisaged by Reich.

A newly born puppy, we can easily suppose, might be such a being. To simplify the situation—and the puppy’s sensory experience—as far as possible, let’s locate our baby puppy in outer space, floating mid-air, weightless, in a well-heated chamber, one’s that’s fully equipped with air. In the absence of any gravitational field, there will be no experience of ‘up’ or ‘down’ for our puppy. Also, since the puppy is floating motionless (more or less) in mid-air, there is nothing in contact with its skin, so no sensations to ground a sense of ‘in here’ and ‘out there’. Sadly, our puppy was born blind and deaf, and so lacks visual and auditory experience, and the perspective on the world these provide. All our puppy has is *bodily* experience: it has a sense of being spatially extended, and it feels a pleasant warmth pervading the space it extends through, but that’s all. (Of course it does not *think* of itself as such—it merely enjoys the simple bodily sensations.) Would the consciousness of this simple being be *centred* at all? I suspect not. Would its experience be *presentational* in any kind of way? Again, I suspect not.

X

This is all rather speculative, to be sure, but this is—to an extent—inevitable. As I willingly concede, so far as our own experience is concerned, the proponents of the *mineness* or *for-me-ness* thesis have a point. Much of our experience does seem ‘owned’ in one way or another, much of it is perspectival and presentational in character. When we start to consider whether experience lacking these features is possible, and we begin to ponder what it might be like to be such a subject, we are obliged to speculate about beings whose consciousness is very *unlike* our own. Consequently, I do not claim to have settled anything in a definitive manner here. Even so, the speculations we have been entertaining latterly do I think suffice to shed some doubt on whether for-me-ness is a truly universal feature of consciousness, in the way its proponents claim it to be.

What I also hope to have shown is that irrespective of where the truth lies on this issue, the sense of self is a real but multi-factorial aspect of experience, one that is grounded in a number of different experiential phenomena. The various form of cognitive phenomenology whose presence (or absence) is responsible for the disrupted sense of personal ownership in the clinical cases we encountered earlier are important. But so too are the various spatial properties of consciousness which together make it possible for our experience to have a presentational character. At the very least the reductive programme with regard to the *sense of self* looks to be in good shape.

Moreover, if I am right in thinking that the sense of self is not an essential property of consciousness *per se*, this has implications for both the kind of subjects there might be, and the forms of consciousness that are available to them. Even if it turns out to be true that all experience must have a subject, in the case of some subjects—those for whom the sense of self is entirely lacking—their consciousness may seem entirely subject-free, strange though that might seem.[[26]](#footnote-26)

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x

1. According to Johnston, a bare locus is “capable of persisting through any amount of physical or psychological discontinuity, and hence only tenuously related to any particular human body or personality … Bare loci are thus separately existing entities distinct from bodies and brains, whose existence is never an indeterminate matter.’ (1992: 594). It seems safe to conclude that we cannot perceive these centres of apperception. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As Olson points out, ‘Human beings in a persistent vegetative state are biologically alive, but their mental capacities are permanently destroyed. They are certainly human animals. But we might not want to call them people. The same goes for human embryos.’ (2003: 319) For recent forceful and ingenious defense of animalism see Snowdon (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Strawson’s *Selves* (2009) for the full story. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Strawson (2006), and several of the essays in his (2008). Strawson is by no alone in taking panpsychism seriously: also see Chalmers (2015), Coleman (2013) and Goff (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Since the elementary particles which compose an organism will remain conscious—still assuming panpsychism—long after the organism itself has perished, animal subjects are (arguably) more intimately related to consciousness than Cartesian subjects or bare loci! [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a much fuller account of the conditions under experiential capacities at and over time belong to the same subject, see Dainton (2008) chapter 4, where I explore several ways of developing this basic idea. For more succinct overviews of the theory, see Dainton (2012, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Dainton (2006) I argue that a stream of consciousness consists of experiences that are unified by *co-consciousness*, in its synchronic and diachronic forms. The co-consciousness relation—or ‘experienced togetherness’— is primitive, or so I argue, and is responsible for the characteristic continuity our ordinary streams exhibit, where each brief phase is experienced as flowing seamlessly into the next. For a more recent defence of this approach see Dainton (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Or as Winfield puts it, ‘… your current experience is not revealed to your C-system (or the organism of which the C-system is a part) but it *is* revealed to you. To identify the self with the C-system is therefore untenable. The C-system ‘has’ an experience only in the sense that it produces one: but you (the subject of the experience) have experiences in the sense of being immediately aware of them.’ (2015: 144) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Once we acknowledge that realizations of phenomenal properties can be intrinsically conscious the separate act of awareness appears superfluous to requirements. Or so I have argued elsewhere, e.g. Dainton (2002), (2008, §2.4.) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In *The Phenomenal Self* (2008, §6.1–§6.4) I suggest that typical human subjects are best construed as *extended C-systems­*, where the latter consist of capacities for experience that are embedded, in distinctive ways, in complex psychological systems. Our cognitive systems are thus literally parts of ourselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Although I think it very likely that Hume was right, there is one combination of views which opens up the possibility of his being wrong. If direct realism is true there is no obstacle—other than our (surgically removable) skulls—to our perceiving our brains. Suppose direct realism is true; if we now also hold—as some do—that dispositional properties identical with their categorical bases, and we also hold that our experiential capacities are dispositional properties of our brains, then it may be that C-systems (or some of their constituents) *are* observable. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. We may be C-systems, but we are C-systems of a distinctive sort by virtue of having bodies, in the particular way we *do* have them. For an account of embodiment—and its four ‘grades’ or ‘depths’—see Dainton (2008, §7.2-§7.4). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As I generally am whenever I think seriously about the nature of perceptual experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The doctrine that consciousness is (in some way) inherently reflexive can be traced back to Aristotle, and versions of thesis have been endorsed by philosophers from a range of traditions, e.g. Locke, Brentano, Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and more recently by Flanagan (1992) and Strawson (2013). See Kriegel & Williford (2006) for further contemporary proponents. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As I pointed out (2008: 44), the contents of the inner background are diverse, including as they do ‘fringe’ feelings associated with *being in a state of readiness* or *preparing for what comes next* or *opening or straining one’s senses* or *being about to act* or *feeling energized and equipped for the task in hand.* These everyday cognitive feelings contribute significantly to the sense we have of being subjects, of being *more* than our current sensory experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Although I am not focusing on it here, there is an important diachronic aspect to the phenomenal background. Since each brief phase of a stream of consciousness is experientially connected to its neighbours the sense of self is a continuous felt presence that is experienced *as* continuous. This is something Zahavi also holds, although his account of temporal experience differs from mine­—see Zahavi (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Bertossa *et al* sum up thus: ‘Human volunteers generally seem to find it easy and natural to locate their centre of self, the place ‘I am’ or the I-that-perceives.  With considerable consistency, sighted or blind, Western or non Western, it is placed somewhere near the centre of their head. This seat corresponds to a ‘point zero’, the origin (0,0,0) point of a Cartesian spatial geometric framework, whose axes are defined by the subject’s experience  of what lies close or far from him,  in front or behind, up or below, where their sense of ‘I’ and their sense of ‘here’ are felt to coincide. ‘ The numbers tested were not huge (59 volunteers in total), 8 blind, 51 sighted, 23 students, 32 employed, 4 retired, five non-Western (Morocco, Eritrea, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Philippines). None of the volunteers had taken courses on phenomenology or meditation prior to the tests. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. From an evolutionary perspective it is easy to see why this should be the case. An animal which, on seeing a tiger approach, paused to think ‘Ah, I can see a tiger, I wonder if it’s anywhere near to *me*?’ would not last for long in hostile environments. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Also see Blanke & Metzinger (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The rare case of someone able to trigger this type of out-of-body experience at will has recently been reported, see Smith & Messier (2014). The subject in question—a 24 year old psychology graduate at the time—could make herself dizzy by rotating the hallucinated body she seemed to be occupying. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. From Blanke & Metzinger (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. One patient jumped out of a window ‘in order to stop the intolerable feeling of being divided in two’—see Brugger *et al*, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. We should also bear in mind here that Samantha’s mind is very probably running at a faster rate than ours, so a fraction of a second for her might contain a good deal more – subjectively – than a fraction of a second for us. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Alternatively, and still in a Dennetttian vein, we can suppose that she knows that her mental life is sustained by a number of different computers at widely separated locations, and that only one of these computer—she doesn’t know which—is generating her consciousness at any one time. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For more on this see Lagercrantz & Changeux (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. And if I right in thinking we are C-systems, the experience of such subjects reflects the way things really are—since C-systems are not the kind of thing which *can* appear in their subjects experience. My thanks to Sam Coleman, Philip Goff, Stan Klein, Greg Miller, Thomas Schramme, Galen Strawson and Tom Winfield. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)