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Two Takes on a One-Level Account of Consciousness

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Abstract: My presentation will discuss two one-level accounts of consciousness, a Brentanian and a Husserlian. I will address some of the relevant differences—I will mainly focus on the question of whether pre-reflective self-consciousness is to be understood as (i) an extraordinary object-consciousness or (ii) not as an object-consciousness at all—and argue in favour of the Husserlian account.

What is the relation between consciousness and self-consciousness? Until quite recently, higher-order theories of consciousness have enjoyed great popularity. Many have argued that the distinction between conscious and non-conscious mental states rests upon the presence or absence of a relevant meta-mental state. Apparently, the only contentious issue was whether the higher-order state in question was thought-like (Rosenthal 1993) or perception-like (Armstrong 1968, Lycan 1997) in nature. In either case, however, (intransitive) consciousness was taken to be a question of the mind directing its intentional aim upon its own states and operations. Self-directedness was taken to be constitutive of (intransitive) consciousness, or to put it differently, (intransitive) consciousness was explained in terms of self-consciousness.

Within the past few years or so, the situation has changed. Not only have the higher-order theories met growing criticism; in philosophical circles, the so-called one-level account of consciousness has become so attractive, that there are currently several different competing versions on the market.

In the following brief remarks, I will forego a discussion of the shortcomings of the higher-order theories,[1] and instead focus on two of these one-level accounts. Both of the accounts I have in mind have had various defenders in the 20th century, but to simplify matters, I will name them after two of their most illustrious progenitors, and call them the Brentanian and the Husserlian account respectively.

My own allegiance is to the Husserlian account, which was subsequently defended in modified form by Sartre and Heidegger, among others. My aim in the following will be to problematize what I take to be some of the main features of the Brentanian account, thereby providing a kind of indirect argument for the Husserlian view.

1. Brentano's account

Brentano's account in *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* (1874) of what he calls *inner consciousness* has been widely discussed in recent years. So I will not spend time presenting the theory in its entirety, but simply call attention to the two features that I wish to criticize.

Let us assume that I consciously perceive the hum of the refrigerator. What is the structure of my consciousness in this case, according to Brentano? I perceive the hum and I am conscious of the perception, and I consequently have two objects: The hum and the perception. Contrary to appearance, however, I do not have two different mental states. Brentano claims that the perception of the hum is united so intrinsically and intimately with the consciousness of the perception of the hum, that they only constitute one single psychical phenomenon. Their apparent separation is merely due to a conceptual differentiation:

> In the same mental phenomenon in which the sound is present to our minds we simultaneously apprehend the mental phenomenon itself. What is more, we apprehend it in accordance with its dual nature insofar as it has the sound as content within it, and insofar as it has itself as content at the same time. We can say that the sound is the *primary object* of the *act* of hearing, and that the act of hearing itself is the *secondary object* (Brentano, 1874, 179-180 [1973, 127-128]).

Brentano consequently claims that a mental state is conscious not by being taken as an object by a further mental state, but by taking itself as object. Thus, every conscious experience has a double object, a primary and a secondary. In the case of the hearing of the hum of the refrigerator, the primary and thematic object is the hum; the secondary and unthematic object is the hearing. The focus of attention is on the primary object, and our consciousness of the mental state itself is normally secondary and incidental.

When I hear the hum, I am co-conscious of my hearing. But am I, on Brentano's account, also conscious of this co-consciousness? Brentano replies that the consciousness of the hearing of the tone coincides with the consciousness of this consciousness. Thus, the consciousness which accompanies the hearing of the tone is a consciousness, not only

of the hearing of the tone, but of the *entire* psychical act, i.e., of itself as well (Brentano 1874, 182-183).

2. Gurwitsch's criticism

Let us examine this latter claim more carefully. Is it really sound? Quite a number of contributors, especially German, have argued that Brentano in making this statement has fallen victim to an infinite regress. The criticism is mainly associated with the names of Dieter Henrich, Konrad Cramer and Ulrich Pothast,[2] all members of the so-called Heidelberg School. But the first to raise this specific objection was probably Aaron Gurwitsch, in his book *Die mitmenschlichen Begegnungen in der Milieuwelt,* which was completed in 1931, though published only in 1977. Given Gurwitsch's close ties to Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre, I will in the following simply present his version of the criticism.

Gurwitsch is himself an advocate of a one-level account of consciousness. As he writes:

> Consciousness is defined by intentionality. It is consciousness of an object on the one hand and an inner awareness of itself on the other hand. Being confronted with an object, I am at once conscious of this object and aware of my being conscious of it. This awareness in no way means reflection: to know that I am dealing with the object which, for instance, I am just perceiving, I need not experience a second act bearing upon the perception and making it its object. In simply dealing with the object I am aware of this very dealing (Gurwitsch 1941, 330)

Despite his sympathy for the one-level account, Gurwitsch has misgivings about the specifics of Brentano's construal. Brentano takes every psychical phenomenon to be characterized by a double intentional relation. Every experience has a primary object, and in addition, it has itself—in its totality—as its own secondary object. Thus, the secondary object of consciousness must encompass not only the consciousness of the primary object, but also the consciousness of this consciousness. But as Gurwitsch points out, this is not where it ends. For the very same reason every *intentional consciousness* of a primary object must in addition include itself as its own secondary object, every *intentional consciousness* of a secondary object must in addition include itself as its own tertiary object, and so forth. Gurwitsch concedes that Brentano, by talking of the peculiar fusion of the object of inner presentation with itself, and of the interwovenness of both in one and the same psychical act, escapes what might be called an "external infinite regress", where discrete acts of reflections are stratified one upon the other. But he claims that Brentano's model gives rise instead to what he calls an "internal infinity" (Gurwitsch 1979, 89-90).

Perhaps one can explain Gurwitsch's misgivings in even simpler terms. Brentano conceives of inner consciousness as an intentional consciousness of a secondary object. But according to his own, perhaps inadvertently awkward, formulation, this secondary object encompasses the whole act in its totality, i.e., it is itself something which is in possession of an inner consciousness. The moment we inquire what this additional inner

consciousness is conscious of, it is evident that the regress is rolling. It is a regress that goes inwards, so to speak, and which involves an infinitely increasing complexity.

It is important to realize that Gurwitsch's criticism isn't directed at the circularity in Brentano's definition of inner consciousness. Given that it might arguably be impossible to provide such a non-circular definition of the phenomenon in question, such a criticism would in any case have been problematic. Rather, Gurwitsch objects to the specific way in which Brentano conceives of inner consciousness. According to Gurwitsch, we need to recognize the existence of what he calls "implicit knowledge". This implicit knowledge is non-objectifying; it is not knowledge of objects. Taking the example of an affective state, Gurwitsch writes that he "who is angry knows about his anger while he is angry and lives in his anger without having to make his mental living of anger an object" (Gurwitsch 1979, 86). When we are living through the anger,

> we do not stand over against the anger, and that signifies that it is not an *object* for us. Yet we still "know" about it: living entirely in anger and not reflecting on it, in the *anger itself* I "know" about my psychical state. This "knowledge" of mine is essentially different from the knowledge that belongs to thematic consciousness. It is "immanent" to the anger, or, stated in another way: while knowing about my anger, I "remain" in it (Gurwitsch 1979, 87).

As Gurwitsch then goes on to point out, even a "secondary" object is an object in the sense of something we stand-over-against [*Gegenstand*]. He consequently claims, and this is a point I will return to in a moment, that the basic problem with Brentano's account is that it fails to do justice to the specific phenomenological characteristic of the implicit non-objectifying knowledge that we enjoy of our mental life while living it through (Gurwitsch 1979, 89).

3. Objectifying vs. non-objectifying self-consciousness

How does Brentano's theory differ from the higher-order theories? At first sight the difference seems obvious. In contrast to the higher-order model that claims that consciousness is an extrinsic property of those mental states that have it, a property bestowed upon them from without by some further states, Brentano argues that the feature in virtue of which a mental state is conscious is located within the state itself; it is an intrinsic property of those mental states that have it. But on closer inspection, this difference might conceal some striking similarities. Both the higher-order theories and Brentano's one-level theory construe (intransitive) consciousness in terms of self-consciousness. In both cases, (intransitive) consciousness is taken to be a question of the mind directing its intentional aim upon its own states and operations. Moreover, both types of theory take conscious states to involve two representational contents. In the case of a conscious perception of a refrigerator, there is an outward directed first-order content (that takes the refrigerator as its object), and an inward directed second-order content (that takes the perception as its object). Their only disagreement is over the question of whether there are two distinct mental states, each with its own representational content, or only one mental state with a twofold representational content. Thus, both types of theory argue that for a state to be conscious means for it to be represented, and they only differ in whether it is represented by itself or by another state.

How should one appraise this structural similarity? Kriegel has recently argued that it must count as an argument in favour of the Brentanian account. If two theories are almost identical, but one has the added advantage of being phenomenologically adequate (since it conceives of consciousness as an intrinsic property), it is the latter that wins the day (Kriegel 2003, 488). Others, however, have been more worried. The close proximity between the two accounts could also be taken as an indication that Brentano might not really have succeeded in staying clear of the pitfalls of the higher-order view. Is it really consistent to defend a one-level account while at the same time claiming that each conscious state involves not only a primary awareness of its object but also a secondary awareness of itself, or does the latter claim turn Brentano's supposedly one-level theory into a higher-order theory in disguise (Thomasson 2000, 190-192, 199)? To put it differently, it could be argued that Brentano's claim that every conscious intentional state takes two objects, a primary (external) object and a secondary (internal) object, remains committed to a higher-order account of consciousness; it simply postulates it as being implicitly contained in every conscious state. "It wants", as Thomas puts it, "the benefits of a first order account of consciousness while illegitimately smuggling in a second order (higher order) view as well" (Thomas 2003, 169).

Like the Brentanian account, the Husserlian account argues that the feature in virtue of which a mental state is conscious is located within the state itself; it is an intrinsic property of those mental states that have it. Thus, in contrast to the higher-order theory, the Husserlian account denies that the self-consciousness that is present the moment I consciously experience something is to be understood in terms of some kind of reflection, or introspection, or higher-order monitoring. In order to emphasize this, the type of self-consciousness in question is frequently called *pre-reflective* self-consciousness. To claim that the self-consciousness is pre-reflective is to claim that it is intrinsic to the experiential episode in question. Moreover, it is not thematic or attentive or voluntarily brought about; rather it is tacit, and very importantly, thoroughly non-objectifying. In short, the Husserlian account rejects the attempt to construe intransitive consciousness in terms of transitive consciousness. Thus, not only does it reject the view that a mental state becomes conscious by being taken as an object by a higher-order state, it also rejects the view espoused by Brentano according to which a mental state becomes conscious by taking itself as an object. Brentano and Husserl both share the view that self-consciousness (or to use Brentano's terminology "inner consciousness") differs from ordinary object-consciousness. The issue of controversy is over whether self-consciousness is (i) merely an extraordinary object-consciousness or (ii) not an object-consciousness at all. In contrast to Brentano, Husserl thinks the latter, more radical, move is required.

For Husserl, an experience is conscious of itself, is lived through (*erlebt*), without being an intentional object (Husserl 1984, 399; cf. Sartre 1936, 28-29). That something is experienced, "and is in this sense conscious, does not and cannot mean that this is the object of an act of consciousness, in the sense that a perception, a presentation or a judgment is directed upon it (Husserl 1984, 165 [2001, I, 273]). As Husserl then adds in the 6th Logical Investigation: "Experiential being is not object being [Erlebtsein ist nicht Gegenständlichsein]" (Husserl 1984, 669 [2001, II/279. Translation modified]). This is not to deny that we can, in fact, direct our attention towards our experiences and thereby take them as objects of an inner perception (Husserl 1984, 424), but this only occurs the

moment we reflect upon them. This might come as a slight surprise to those who thought that one of the central doctrines in phenomenology is the doctrine of intentionality – i.e., the claim that all consciousness is intentional, that all consciousness is object-consciousness—but Husserl (as well as later phenomenologists) would explicitly deny that pre-reflective self-consciousness involves a subject-object relation. In his view, when one is pre-reflectively conscious of one's own experiences, one is not aware of them as objects. My pre-reflective access to my own mental life in first-personal experience is immediate, non-observational and non-objectifying. It is non-objectifying in the sense that I do not occupy the position or perspective of a spectator or in(tro)spector on it.

In addition, it could be argued that I not only *do* not occupy such a position, but I *cannot* pre-reflectively occupy such a position, if the experiences in question are to be given as *my* experiences. Shoemaker has provided a classical argument purporting to show why it is impossible to account for first-personal self-reference in terms of a successful object-identification. In order to identify something as oneself one obviously has to hold something true of it that one already knows to be true of oneself. This self-knowledge might in some cases be grounded in some further identification, but the supposition that *every* item of self-knowledge rests on identification leads to an infinite regress (Shoemaker 1968, 561). This holds even for self-identification obtained through introspection. That is, it will not do to claim that introspection is distinguished by the fact that its object has a property which immediately identifies it as being me, and which no other self could possibly have, namely, the property of being the private and exclusive object of exactly my introspection. This explanation will not do because I will be unable to identify an introspected self as myself by the fact that it is introspectively observed by me, unless I know it is the object of *my* introspection, i.e., unless I know that it is in fact *me* who undertakes this introspection, and this knowledge cannot itself be based on identification, on pain of infinite regress (Shoemaker 1968, 562-563).

An objection to the idea that pre-reflective self-consciousness is in its core non-intentional and non-objectifying would be that there is something slightly obscure about it. The Husserlian account argues that object-consciousness necessarily entails an epistemic divide between that which appears and that to whom it appears, between the object and the subject of experience. This is why it considers object-consciousness singularly unsuitable as a way to account for self-consciousness. In reply, however, it could be objected that it is simply "question-begging to build into the very notion of 'x is an object for y' the implication that $x \neq y$" (Williford 2006).

It is true, of course, that the plausibility of the claim that self-consciousness and object-consciousness are mutually exclusive modes of consciousness depends to a large extent on what we mean by "object" (cf. Cassam 1997, 5). In order to understand the phenomenological point of view, it is crucial, however, not to conflate issues of ontology with issues of phenomenology. The Husserlian claim is not that the object of experience must always differ ontologically from the subject of experience, as if the subject and the object of experience must necessarily be two different entities. Rather, the claim is that for x to be an object of experience is for x to be in possession of a special experiential or cognitive or epistemic status. To put it differently, from a phenomenological perspective, objecthood is a specific mode of givenness. It is something that is constituted in a process of objectification. More specifically, for Husserl something is only given as an object the

moment it is experienced as being in possession of a sort of *transcendence*. It is only when we experience something as a unity within a multiplicity of adumbrations, as an identity across differences, that is, as something that transcends its actual appearance, as something that can be intended as the same throughout a variety of experiential states, as something that is irreducible to its present givenness *for me*, that we experience it as an object. The appearance of objects consequently entails a dyadic structure, a distinction between the dative and genitive of manifestation, a distinction between that of which it is an appearance and the one to whom it is appearing. If x is to be given as an object of experience, x must be given as differing from the subjective experience that takes it as an object. In short, an object of experience is something that, per definition, stands in opposition to or over against the subject of experience (cf. the German term *Gegenstand*). Given this understanding of what it means for something to be an object, I think it should be clear why pre-reflective self-consciousness cannot be a question of a subject-object relation. Furthermore, it should also be clear why it is strictly impossible for an experience to take itself as an object. For x to be an object for y is for x to be in possession of a certain transcendence vis-à-vis y, but it is strictly impossible for an experience to possess such a transcendence vis-à-vis itself. As far as I can see, the only way to avoid this conclusion is by rejecting its premise, i.e., the understanding of what it means to be an object, but I see no compelling reason to do so. The suggestion that we might avoid the problems outlined by simply understanding "object" in the most inclusive and theoretically neutral sense possible, i.e., by simply taking it to mean "anything whatsoever", is, in my view, not the right way to go, since it would make the term "object" void of sense.

4. Conclusion

The two accounts of consciousness that I have presented are both one-level accounts. As I have tried to show, however, the Husserlian account is more unequivocally so than the Brentanian account. If we scratch beneath the surface, the Brentanian account turns out to share quite a number of features with the higher-order theories, the two most significant ones being the assumption that intransitive consciousness must be explained in terms of transitive consciousness and the claim that our experiential life must either be given as an object or not be given at all. Its defenders might argue that the Brentanian account occupies a middle position, combining the best elements from the higher-order theories and the Husserlian account respectively. Its detractors, however, would say that its lack of radicality, its only half-hearted dissociation from the higher-order theories, prevents it from constituting a convincing account of consciousness.[3,4]

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Notes

1. Cf. however Zahavi 1999, 2004, 2005.

2. Henrich 1970, Pothast 1971, Cramer 1974.

3. For a more extensive discussion of the Husserlian alternative, cf. Zahavi 1998, 1999, 2005, and 2006.

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