

SARTRE ON BODILY TRANSPARENCY*

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Abstract: Sartre's obscure but evocative remarks on bodily awareness have often been cited, but, I argue, they have rarely been understood. This paper aims to bring the connection between Sartre's views on bodily awareness and his more general distinction between "positional" and "non-positional" consciousness. Sartre's main claim about bodily awareness, I

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argue, is that our primary awareness of our own bodies is a form of non-positional consciousness. I show that he is right about this, and right to think that recognizing this point is crucial to understanding what it is for something to be my body.

[P]recisely because the body is inapprehensible, it does not really belong to the objects in the world—i.e., to those objects which I know and which I utilize. Yet on the other hand, since I can be nothing without being the consciousness of what I am, the body must necessarily be in some way given to my consciousness.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 328-9 (368)¹

1. THE SUBJECT-OBJECT PROBLEM

After completing his famous argument for the “real distinction” between mind and body, Descartes acknowledges that certain sorts of experience can lead us to overlook this distinction:

There is nothing that my own nature teaches me more vividly than that I have a body, and that when I feel pain there is something wrong with the body, that when I am hungry or thirsty the body needs food and drink, and so on... Nature also teaches me, by these

¹ I give page references to works by Sartre first in their standard English translation and then parenthetically in a contemporary French edition (see the bibliography for details). I use the following abbreviations: BN = *Being and Nothingness* (*L'être et le néant*); TE = *The Transcendence of the Ego* (*La transcendance de l'Ego*).

sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and my body form a unit. If this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight that his ship is broken.²

A philosopher who rejects Cartesian dualism might want to resist some of Descartes's formulations here: perhaps we already concede too much to dualism if we ask what sensations of pain, hunger, and thirst teach us about how we are "present in our bodies." Be that as it may, something in Descartes's observation seems right. My own body seems to be known to me in a specially intimate way in which other worldly bodies are not. In experiencing sensations of pain, hunger, and thirst, I do not merely come to *know about* the condition of my body, as a sailor might come to know about the condition of his ship. I *feel* the condition of my body, in such a way that damage to my body is experienced as damage *I* suffer and its needs are experienced as *my own* needs. Descartes calls such experiences "confused modes of thinking" because they mix together presentations of the condition of the thinking subject with presentations of the condition of a material body. A more neutral statement of the matter might be that such awareness gives me *prima facie* grounds for doubting that there are two things presented here. My bodily sensations seem to give me awareness of my body, not "from the outside", as if I were *observing* a certain

² René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, §VI, AT 81.

object, but “from the inside”, as if I *were* the object in question. They present a condition of my body as if it were a condition of my very self.

Yet though it is natural to express the import of bodily awareness in this way, the meaning of this idea is not easy to make clear. In feeling a pain in my arm, I seem to learn, through sensation, about the condition of a certain arm – perhaps that it is injured, at any rate that it is causing me pain. How does this differ in principle from the perceptual relation in which a sailor might stand to the hull of his ship when he sees that it is damaged, or at any rate looks to be so? Might our capacity to “feel” the condition of our bodies be just one more sense modality, differing from the five familiar senses in that it is directed exclusively toward a single object, and perhaps involving some distinctive phenomenology that marks out the relevant object as myself, but still presenting what are fundamentally *perceptions* of this object? A significant number of contemporary philosophers endorse this sort of view: they hold that our capacity for bodily sensation, and also – something Descartes does not mention – our capacity for “proprioceptive” awareness of the position and arrangement of our limbs, are specialized perceptual capacities, differing from our external senses in important ways, but sharing with them the basic structure in virtue of which a subject is informed of the condition of an object by experiencing characteristic sensory impressions normally caused by this object.³

³ Prominent philosophical advocates of this sort of view include Armstrong 1962, O’Shaughnessy 1995, and Bermúdez 1997. The view is also widespread among psychologists and neuroscientists. For opposition, see Anscombe 1962, Brewer 1995, Gallagher 2003, and McDowell 2011.

At any rate, whether or not it is correct to think of bodily awareness as a kind of perceptual awareness, it seems inevitable that we must conceive of it as some sort of awareness of an object. After all, our bodies surely are material objects, so what can bodily awareness be but an awareness in which these objects are presented to us? And if this is right, then making sense of Descartes's observation seems to require understanding how there can be an awareness that presents a material object, not merely as one more entity encountered by the knowing subject, but as the subject herself. We might call this the *Subject-Object Problem*: what can it consist in for the knowing subject to be presented as something *in* the world? What features of the presentation of an object could mark it out as the knowing subject herself?

Once the problem of bodily awareness has been framed in this way, further choice-points come into view. Is there perhaps some special "phenomenology of ownership" that singles out a certain body as my own? Or does my sense of a certain body as my own arise, not from some separable element of phenomenology, but from a recognition of general connections between certain kinds of information about this body and my own capacities for perception, sensation, and voluntary movement? Each of these positions has been defended in recent work on bodily awareness, but a point on which both sides generally agree is that bodily awareness involves a presentation of a certain body that is somehow marked as a presentation of myself.⁴

⁴ For different views about the basis of our "sense of ownership" of our bodies, see for instance Brewer 1995, Martin 1995, Bermúdez 2005, de Vignemont 2007 & 2013.

2. SARTRE'S ENIGMATIC INTERVENTION

The great twentieth-century Cartesian Jean-Paul Sartre suggested that this way of formulating the problem of bodily awareness sets us on the wrong path from the start. In his chapter on “The Body” in *Being and Nothingness*, he famously remarks that, if I begin by conceiving of my body as an object of which I am aware, the problem of how my consciousness relates to this body will prove insoluble:

[I]f after grasping ‘my’ consciousness in its absolute interiority and by a series of reflective acts, I then seek to unite it with a certain living object composed of a nervous system, a brain, glands, digestive, respiratory, and circulatory organs, whose very matter is capable of being analyzed chemically into atoms of hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, etc., then I am going to encounter insurmountable difficulties. But these difficulties all stem from the fact that I try to unite my consciousness not with *my* body but with the body of *others*. In fact the body which I have just described is not *my* body such as it is for *me*. (BN, p. 303 (342))

This passage is often quoted, and it has served as an inspiration for important work on bodily awareness.⁵ Yet it is undeniably obscure, and even authors inspired by Sartre’s remark have, I think, often failed to grasp its point.

To see the obscurity, consider that my body surely *is* a “living object” (or better, the body of a certain kind of

⁵ For discussion of Sartre’s views on bodily awareness, see Evans 1982, Brewer 1995, Cassam 1997, and Longuenesse 2017.

living animal) consisting of a nervous system, glands, digestive organs, etc. Any account of bodily awareness that does not explain how it can make me aware of this sort of thing does not, we might think, address the crux of the Subject-Object Problem: it does not explain how a certain material body can be presented to the conscious subject as her very self. And in any case, even if we grant that there is some other mode of presentation of my body which does not present it *as* a material body with organs, glands, etc., surely the crucial question is whether the object of which my bodily awareness makes me aware is *identical* to a certain material body. But questions of identity turn, not on any particular agreement in modes of presentation, but simply on the identities of the things presented. The Morning Star and the Evening Star have quite different modes of presentation; still they may be the very same star, presented in different ways. If I *am* a certain bodily being, why should acknowledging this fact create “insuperable difficulties” for an account of “my body as it is for me”?

Perhaps moved by such concerns, some authors have sought to extract a more straightforward point from Sartre’s discussion. Commenting on the passage quoted above, for instance, Gareth Evans remarks:

[I]n one way [Sartre’s claim] is correct: I can identify myself with a bit of matter only if I know that bit of matter ‘from the inside’—so that a groundwork for the identification is laid in the ordinary self-ascriptive statements I learn to make. But what this constitutes a groundwork for is an ability to identify myself with an element of the objective order—a

body for others, if you like—unreservedly.
(Evans 1982, p. 266)⁶

Evans takes Sartre’s good point to be to this: I can identify an “element of the objective order” as myself only because I have immediate, first personal awareness of certain facts about that body, such as that my legs are bent (on the basis of proprioception), that I am leaning to the left (on the basis of my vestibular sense), that I am standing in front of a table (on the basis of visual observation of the table, seen from a certain characteristic perspective). These are modes of awareness that

I am F

for some range of values of F that are indisputably properties of tangible bodies in space, and yet they are known *immediately* in that I can know these first person propositions to be true without needing to infer them from independent knowledge that

X is F & I am X.

On Evans’s reading, Sartre’s good point is that, if we did not have such immediate, first personal awareness of certain of our own bodily properties, we would be unable to identify ourselves as elements of the objective order. But, he holds, admitting this need not require us to deny

⁶ The quoted text was composed by Evans’s editor, John McDowell, summarizing notes that Evans was not able to integrate into the finished text before his untimely death. For similar reactions to Sartre’s view, see Cassam 1997, p. 72 and Bermúdez 2005.

that bodily awareness presents me with the condition of a certain object, the one to which I refer when I say “I”.

I think what Evans offers as a more circumspect statement of Sartre’s point misses Sartre’s real insight. Sartre’s claim is more radical: that bodily awareness does not, in the first instance, present *me* or *my condition* as such. And I think Sartre is right about this. My aim here is to bring this out by connecting Sartre’s remarks on bodily awareness with another Sartrean idea that forms the background to this discussion: his distinction between “positional” and “non-positional” consciousness. Sartre’s main point, I want to suggest, is that our primary form of bodily awareness is a form of *non-positional* consciousness. I will argue that he is right about this, and right to think that recognizing this point is crucial to understanding what it is for something to be my body. At the same time, I hope that the following discussion will highlight the wider importance of the positional/non-positional distinction.

3. POSITIONAL VS. NON-POSITIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

I begin with a brief and opinionated overview of Sartre’s distinction between positional and non-positional consciousness, as it is introduced in the Introduction to *Being and Nothingness*. This distinction belongs to Sartre’s broader enterprise of characterizing “consciousness”, the mode of being characteristic of the kind of entity he calls “the for-itself”. Sartre famously makes the following claims about consciousness:

- (S1) “All consciousness ... is consciousness of something. This means that there is no consciousness that is not a *positing* of a transcendent object” (BN, p. li (17)).

- (S2) “[A]ll knowing consciousness [*conscience connaissante*] can be knowledge of nothing but its object” (BN, p. lii (18)).
- (S3) “[A]ll positional consciousness of an object is at the same time non-positional consciousness of itself” (BN, p. liii (19)).
- (S4) “[I]t is the non-reflective consciousness [*conscience non-réflexive*] that makes reflection possible” (BN, p. liii (19)).

We can introduce the positional/non-positional distinction by explicating these four propositions.

(S1) is a point that Sartre credits to Husserl: it encapsulates the idea that the defining trait of the psychic dimension of our existence – “consciousness” being Sartre’s generic term for the mode of being of the psychic – is its intentionality, its being *of* or *about* some object that is not identical to that very state of consciousness.⁷ In this sense, consciousness “transcends” itself to posit a realm of being beyond itself. “Positing” is Sartre’s term for the relation of consciousness to its object (i.e. that which we would specify in specifying *what* it is a consciousness of: an

⁷ I will follow the common practice of speaking of “states” of consciousness, though Sartre himself would reject this mode of expression as implying a passivity that is foreign to consciousness (cf. TE, pp. 61-8 (45-51) and 109n (15n)). I accept that states of consciousness are radically unlike states of non-conscious entities, but I think the term “state” is innocuous once its potentially misleading connotations have been flagged, and it will be useful to have some common noun designating the sort of thing exemplified when a subject is conscious of something.

object in the broadest sense). Consciousness is said to be *positional* inasmuch as it is of or about an object.

Sartre does not think that all positional consciousness consists in *knowing* an object – there are other modes of positing, such as imagining, desiring, and so on – but he does regard knowing as a species of positional consciousness: it is a kind of relation in which consciousness stands to a posited object. That object, and only that object, is what the relevant consciousness is knowledge *of*. This is the thought expressed in (S2).

The crucial point for our purposes is (S3): all positional consciousness of an object involves *non-positional* consciousness of that very state of consciousness. “Non-positional” consciousness is supposed to be a mode of awareness that does *not* posit that of which it is conscious as its intentional object. This may sound like a paradox: how can there be a consciousness of something that does not posit that thing, if to “posit” a thing just is to relate to it in such a way that one is conscious *of* it? Sartre acknowledges the apparent tension here, and responds (when he is careful) by placing the “of” in parentheses when he speaks of non-positional consciousness (of) consciousness (cf. BN, p. liv (20)). I take this to be an admission that whatever sort of consciousness is at issue here must, on pain of contradiction, be different from the sort of positional consciousness in virtue of which we are conscious of transcendent objects. Nevertheless, Sartre insists that there must be such consciousness (of) our own consciousness, inasmuch as there can be “positional” consciousness of objects only if there is at the same time non-positional consciousness (of) consciousness:

[T]he necessary and sufficient condition for a knowing consciousness to be knowledge *of* its object is that it be consciousness of itself as

being this knowing. This is a necessary condition: if my consciousness were not consciousness of being conscious of the table, then it would be consciousness of the table without consciousness of being such, i.e., a consciousness ignorant of itself, an unconscious consciousness—which is absurd. It is a sufficient condition: that I am conscious of being conscious of this table suffices for me in fact to be conscious of it. (BN, p. lii (18))

Sartre thus thinks the idea of a consciousness that is not (non-positionally) conscious (of) itself is absurd: this would be an “unconscious consciousness”, which is a contradiction in terms.

I suspect many contemporary philosophers would not think much of this argument: they would reply that the notion of an “unconscious consciousness” may sound self-contradictory, but if it just consists in consciousness of an *object* without some sort of consciousness of (or even (of)) *that very state of consciousness*, then there is really no contradiction. To insist otherwise is to beg the very question at issue.

I sympathize with this response, but I think it is possible to make a more forceful case for (S3) than Sartre does here. I will turn to this task shortly. First, however, a brief remark about (S4). We have seen that Sartre holds positional consciousness of an object to depend on non-positional consciousness (of) consciousness. (S4) adds that *reflective* consciousness of our own mental states, in which we “posit” these states as objects of knowledge in their own right, is made possible by the presence, prior to reflection, of another form of self-awareness: a non-positional consciousness that belongs intrinsically to the

relevant first-order states. Sartre holds that, when we reflect, it is this non-positional consciousness that we draw on and make explicit.

To see the attraction of these claims, it helps to think about the recently-much-discussed idea that certain questions about our present mental states are normally “transparent” to corresponding questions about the non-mental world. If I want to know how things in my environment visually appear to me, it seems I can simply ask myself to describe my environment, while focusing on certain kinds of features (color, shape, movement, etc.) and setting aside other extraneous information.⁸ If I want to know whether I intend to do A, it seems that I can simply ask whether I am going to do A, while restricting the grounds for my answer to the latter question in certain ways.⁹ And if I want to answer the question whether I believe that *p*, it seems that I can simply ask myself whether *p*.¹⁰ In each case, I answer a question about my own mental state, not by observing myself, either outwardly or through some “inner sense”. Rather, I address a question about some aspect of the non-mental world and treat the corresponding question about my own mental state as settled by my answer to this world-oriented question.

We can restate this point in Sartrean terms by saying that, in all these cases, my *positional* consciousness of some aspect of the non-mental world (things in my environment being thus-and-so, the fact that I am going to do A, the sheer fact that *p*) seems in these cases to supply the basis for a *reflective* consciousness of my own state of

⁸ Cf. Evans 1982, Ch. 7.4; Byrne 2018, Ch. 6.

⁹ Cf. Setiya 2012; Byrne 2018, Ch. 7.

¹⁰ Cf. Evans 1982, Ch. 7.4; Moran 2001, Ch. 2.6; Byrne 2018, Ch. 5

consciousness. But how exactly does the positional consciousness warrant the reflective consciousness? Suppose I am perceptually conscious of a cat lying on a mat. *What* I am conscious of – what my consciousness “posits” – is a state of affairs (the cat’s being on the mat) that might obtain even if I were not perceptually aware of it. So how can my perceptual consciousness of *it* give me knowledge of my own state of perceptual consciousness? This is a Sartrean formulation of what contemporary philosophers commonly call the “Problem of Transparency”.¹¹

Sartre’s doctrine of non-positional consciousness earns its keep by enabling us to solve this problem. The doctrine, to repeat, is that all positional consciousness of an object involves non-positional consciousness (of) this state of consciousness itself, and that reflection simply articulates the significance of this non-positional consciousness. As an illustration of this structure, consider a situation in which I have perceptual consciousness of a gray cat lying on a mat in front of me. What I am “positionally” conscious of is: a gray cat lying on a mat. But I am conscious of this in a particular way, one it would be natural to express by saying “*This* is a gray cat lying on a mat”. Philosophers commonly call such a “this” a “perceptual demonstrative” because it expresses a way of thinking of an object that is available just when the relevant object is perceived. A subject who says “This is a gray cat lying on a mat” on the basis of perceptual consciousness does not say *that she perceives* the relevant cat: the only objects she makes claims about are the cat and the mat. But her *manner* of speaking about these objects presupposes that she perceives them. The fact that she perceives the cat

¹¹ For presentations of this problem, see Dretske 2003 and Byrne 2018, Ch. 4.

and the mat is expressed, we might say, “non-positionally” in her assertion: it is not asserted, but it is a presupposition of the soundness of what is asserted.

Now let us shift our attention from the verbal formula with which a subject might express her perceptual consciousness to her perceptual consciousness itself. What it “posits” is simply: a cat lying on a mat. But again, it presents the cat and the mat in a characteristic way, one that it would be apt to express with a perceptual demonstrative. So what holds true of the assertion used to express this consciousness also holds true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the consciousness itself: it presents its object in a way whose availability presupposes that the relevant object is perceived. The subject’s perceptual consciousness is certainly not *of* herself: it does not posit her as its subject or present her perceptual state as such. But it posits the cat and the mat in a way that presupposes that she perceives them. Hence, a subject who understands the relationship between this mode of presentation of non-mental objects and her own perceptual state would be in a position, on reflection, to ascribe perceptual consciousness to herself. She would, that is, be in a position to achieve warranted *reflective* consciousness of her own perceptual state. Her basis for this reflective consciousness would be an already-present *non-positional* consciousness (of) perceiving implied in the special “haecceitical” mode her consciousness of the cat and the mat.

I think versions of this structure apply also to other varieties of positional consciousness. Consider for instance what we might call “intending consciousness” that I shall do A. This does not involve positional consciousness of my own intending. What it posits is simply: that I will, at some future time, do A. But it posits my future A-ing in a certain characteristic mode, the one that is marked in English by “shall” (or more colloquially, by a certain usage

of the present progressive “am going”). The use of the modal verb “shall” marks the fact that I will A as settled in a certain way: one we might characterize, on reflection, by saying that this aspect of my future is settled by my own present intention. Yet when I say “I shall do A”, I do not assert that I presently intend to do A; rather, I assert that that I will A in a manner that presupposes such an intention. The fact that I now intend to do this is, we might say, expressed “non-positionally” in this assertion. And again, a corresponding point holds for my intending consciousness itself: what it posits is simply my doing A at some future time, but it posits this in the special mode marked by the modal verb “shall”. It is this special mode of consciousness of my own future that I make reflectively explicit when I self-ascribe the intention to do A.

It takes work to clarify, in each case, how the relevant mode of the positional consciousness involves non-positional consciousness (of) consciousness.¹² But the general relationship between positional consciousness, non-positional consciousness, and reflective consciousness should be clear from these examples. Non-positional consciousness (of) consciousness is not simply a further aspect of consciousness distinct from positional consciousness of an object; it is implied in the very mode of consciousness that makes the relevant kind of positing possible. There is a certain way of being conscious *of a cat* that possible only in virtue of the kind of non-positional consciousness of perceiving that is expressed by a perceptual demonstrative. There is a certain way of being conscious *of my own future* that is possible only in virtue of the sort of non-positional consciousness of intending expressed by the modal verb “shall”. Moreover, this

¹² For further discussion, see my “Transparency and Reflection” (Boyle, forthcoming).

necessary non-positional consciousness explains the availability of reflective, positional consciousness of these mental states. I am in a position to know without observation *that I perceive* or *that I intend* because these ascriptions simply make explicit an non-positional consciousness essential to acts of perceiving and intending themselves.

4. NON-POSITIONAL BODILY AWARENESS

Earlier I claimed that Sartre thinks the primary form of bodily awareness is non-positional. But what would it mean for me to have non-positional awareness (of) my own body?

It might seem that, if I am to be aware of my own body, this awareness must be positional. After all, bodies seems to be quite different sorts of entities from states of consciousness. There is indeed some attraction in the idea that our primary awareness of our own states of consciousness does not “posit” them as such. Consciousness seems to be, as G. E. Moore put it, “diaphanous” or “transparent” (Moore 1903, pp. 446, 450): it seems to have no proper content of its own, but to consist wholly in the presentation some consciousness-transcendent object. But whatever the attractions of this idea in the case of states of consciousness, it might seem conspicuously unattractive in the case of bodies. A human body is something concrete and tangible – and tangible, it seems, not just to other persons, but to the subject whose body it is. For don’t I feel my own bodily states in feeling such bodily sensations as pressure applied to my skin, as well as aches, pains, itches and tickles located in particular places in my body? And doesn’t my proprioceptive sense makes me aware of the position and arrangement of my

limbs? My body seems to be the *object* of all this awareness: *it* is presented as being thus-and-so. Such consciousness is undoubtedly distinctive: it is awareness of an object “from inside” in a sense that needs clarification. But is it not still awareness *of* an object? What else could it be?

Sartre would reject this conclusion. He holds that our primary mode of awareness of our own bodies is analogous to our primary mode of awareness of our own states of consciousness: it is a “transparent” awareness in which we are positionally conscious of extra-bodily objects, and only non-positionally conscious (of) our own bodies. Moreover, he suggests that even bodily sensation and proprioception are not fundamentally modes of positional awareness of one’s own body. Let me say something about each of these points.

First, concerning the idea that our primary awareness of our own bodies is analogous to our primary awareness of our own states of consciousness. Sartre makes a point that has also been noted by a number of thinkers: that even when I am conscious only of non-bodily things in my environment, this consciousness is informed by an implicit reference to my own body and its powers. This point is nicely illustrated, for the case of perceptual consciousness, in a remark made by Charles Taylor:

Our perceptual field has an orientational structure, a foreground and a background, an up and down... This orientational structure marks our field as essentially that of an embodied agent. It is not just that the field’s perspective centers on where I am bodily—this by itself doesn’t show that I am essentially an agent. But take the up-down directionality of the field. What is it based on? Up and down are not simply related to my body—up

is not just where my head is and down where my feet are. For I can be lying down, bending over, or upside down; and in all these cases ‘up’ in my field is not the direction of my head. Nor are up and down defined by certain paradigm objects in the field, such as the earth or sky: the earth can slope for instance... Rather, up and down are related to how one would move and act in the field. (Quoted in Evans 1982, p. 156)

Sartre holds that points analogous to Taylor’s can be made about left and right, here and there, near and far, etc.: these “egocentric” modes of presentation of space presuppose a relation to my own bodily location and capacities.¹³ Moreover, he holds that a version of this point applies not just to our ways of apprehending space itself but to our ways of apprehending things in space:

Objects are revealed to us at the heart of a complex instrumentality in which they occupy a determine *place*. This place is not defined by pure spatial co-ordinates but in relation to axes of practical reference. ‘*The glass is on the coffee table*’; this means that we must be careful not to upset the glass if we move the table. The package of tobacco *is on* the mantle piece; this means that we must clear a distance of three yards if we want to go from the pipe to the tobacco while avoiding certain obstacles—end tables, footstools, etc.—which are placed between the mantle piece and the table. In this sense perception is in no way to

¹³ See Evans on egocentric space (1982, Ch. 6.3).

be distinguished from the practical organization of existents into a *world*. (BN, p. 321 (361))

The idea that our primary apprehension of objects in our environment presents them as “ready to hand” for us and as characterized by “affordances” whose nature must be specified relative to our own bodily powers, is by now a familiar thesis of phenomenological philosophy. What Sartre adds is that this apprehension of things under body-relative modes of presentation must itself be understood as resting on a non-positional form of bodily awareness. Like the awareness of perceiving expressed in thinking of *this cat*, the awareness of my own body expressed in thinking of objects as *here* or *there*, *up* or *down*, etc., is an awareness in which my body is not posited as such, but in which an implicit bodily awareness makes possible a specific mode of awareness of extra-bodily things. I apprehend my environment, Sartre says, as an “instrumental field”, and my body itself does not appear in this field (or does so only contingently, as when I look down and see my own hands). In the general and basic case,

[f]ar from the body being *for us* and revealing things to us, it is the instrumental-things which in their original appearance indicate the body to us. (BN, p. 325 (365))

In such awareness, my body appears, not as an object of awareness, but, so to speak, as the transparent medium *through* which the world around me is presented.

But what about my awareness of my body through bodily sensation and proprioception? Surely these forms of awareness “posit” my body as an object! And mustn’t our awareness of the things in the world under body-relative

modes of presentation presuppose such body-positing awareness? After all, how can I learn, through touch, about the tangible properties of the table if I am not already aware, through bodily sensation, of the sensory impressions that touching the table produces in my finger? And how can I be aware that (e.g.) the cup over there is *within reach* if I am not already aware of the location of my hand?

Sartre argues, in effect, that this account of the relation between bodily awareness and awareness of one's environment is the very reverse of the truth. The representation of bodily sensation and proprioception as forms of positional awareness of one's own body is, he maintains, a secondary, reflective representation of these modes of consciousness. They are primarily forms of consciousness in which I posit, not my own body as being in some condition, but rather extra-bodily things as being determined in ways that presuppose non-positional bodily awareness. Here are a few of Sartre's illustration of this point: non-positional consciousness of eye fatigue expressed by experiencing the book I'm reading as hard to take in, its words blurred or quivering, its meaning only intelligible with effort;¹⁴ non-positional consciousness of exertion, pressure, etc. expressed by finding extra-bodily

¹⁴ "Pain is not considered from a reflective point of view; it is not referred back to a body-for-others. It is the-eyes-as-pain or vision-as-pain; it is not distinguished from my way of apprehending transcendent words. We ourselves have called it pain in the eyes for the sake of clarity; but it is not named in consciousness, for it is not *known*. Pain in the eyes is distinguished from other possible pains inexpressibly and by its very being... What then is this pain? Simply the translucent matter of consciousness, its *being-there*, its attachment to the world, in short the peculiar contingency of the act of reading" (BN, pp. 332-333 (372-373)).

objects heavy, resistant, etc.;¹⁵ non-positional consciousness of fatigue expressed by experiencing the road I am walking down as interminable, the slopes increasingly steep, the sun ever more burning, and so on.¹⁶

Some of these reformulations may seem forced. Sometimes, perhaps, eye fatigue inflects my experience of reading a book, but don't I sometimes just feel a shooting pain in my skull? Sartre can admit this, however, while maintaining the point that is crucial for his purposes: that the primary, unreflective mode of bodily sensation is non-positional. For he can say, plausibly enough, that in cases like this, I experience a bodily sensation so acute that it disrupts my unreflective engagement with the world and throws me into a state of reflective preoccupation with my

¹⁵ "We never have any sensation of our effort, but neither do we have peripheral sensations from the muscles, bones, tendons, or skin, which have been suggested to replace the sensation of effort. We perceive the *resistance* of things. What I perceive when I want to lift this glass to my mouth is not my effort but the *heaviness of the glass*—that is, its resistance to entering into an instrumental complex which I have made appear in the world" (BN, p. 324 (364)).

¹⁶ "[F]atigue is only the way in which I exist my body. It is not at first the object of a positional consciousness, but it is the very facticity of my consciousness... Yet to the extent that I apprehend this countryside with my eyes which unfold distances, my legs which climb the hills and consequently cause new sights and obstacles to appear and disappear, with my back which carries the knapsack—to this extent I have a non-positional consciousness (of) this body which rules my relations with the world and which signifies my engagement in the world, in the form of fatigue. Objectively and in correlation with this non-thetic consciousness the roads are revealed as interminable, the slopes as steeper, the sun as more burning, etc." (BN, p. 454 (498-499)).

own condition. This does happen, and not infrequently, but it does not show that the primary form of bodily sensory awareness posits our own bodily states as an object. The latter is a question, not about the frequency with which we attend to our own bodies as opposed to our environment, but about which aspect of such awareness is epistemologically primary. Sartre claims that the primary aspect is the one in which bodily awareness inflects our mode of awareness of the world. For the moment, my aim is merely to clarify the meaning of this claim and to show that it is not untenable. I will turn to Sartre's arguments in support of it in the next section.

Before turning to this topic, however, we must say something about the other, "proprioceptive" dimension of bodily awareness. All the preceding examples concern bodily sensation; Sartre does not directly address the topic of proprioception. But this very oversight points to something worth noticing: awareness of the position of my own limbs is not, except in special cases, part of my lived experience at all. When I wake up before dawn and reach out in the dark to grope for my glasses, my discovery of them as being in a certain place clearly depends on some sort of my awareness of the location of my hand; but it would be poor phenomenology to describe me as presented in the first instance with the location with my hand and only thereby informed of the location of my glasses. On the contrary, what I primarily experience is the discovery of my glasses in a certain place. The awareness of the location of my hand comes into focus only when I engage in a kind of reflective reformulation of this awareness (compare the transition from being tangibly aware of the hardness of the table to being aware of the feeling of pressure that touching the table causes in my finger). Nor is there any reason why the underlying epistemology must take another shape. Why shouldn't I simply discover that my glasses are *there* (where

the significance of this place-designation must, to be sure, be explained by relating it to the location of my hand) without needing first to be aware of *my hand* being there? The appearance of an argument for the contrary view disappears on closer inspection.

Indeed, I think these reflections cast doubt on the very classification of proprioception as a sense. In his evocative essay “The Disembodied Lady”, the neuroscientist Oliver Sacks calls proprioception “our hidden sense”, and marvels at the fact that, whereas our five other senses are “open and obvious”, this sense was first noticed by a neuroscientist in the 1890s (Sacks 1970, p. 43). But if proprioception is a sense, we should ask why it so easily remains hidden, while our other senses stand out unmistakably. Sacks, in the company of many other writers, appears to assume that we overlook this sense simply because it is in some way “recessive” in relation to other forms of sense-perceptual awareness. Our discussion, however, suggests a different moral: the reason this supposed sense remains hidden is not that it is overshadowed by other sensory awareness, but that it does not consist, in the first instance, in a sensory presentation of *the subject’s own body* at all. The subject does not “proprioceive” the arrangement of her own limbs; she *perceives* things and places in her environment *under body-relative modes of presentation*. On reflection, she can make explicit the body-implicating dimension of this awareness, but what this reformulation expresses is not something presented by a distinct channel of perceptual awareness, but simply a kind of shadow cast by her body-mediated awareness of extra-bodily things.

It might seem to speak against this interpretation that people can, as a result of damage to their nervous systems, lose their proprioceptive awareness while retaining their capacity to perceive the world around them. Sacks describes a patient, “Christina”, who suffers from such

“deafferentation”.¹⁷ Physiologically speaking, what Christina loses is a kind of feedback by which her nervous system informs her brain about the position and movements of parts of her body, and Sacks vividly describes how, without such feedback, she becomes incapable of standing, controlling her posture, or performing routine actions without painstaking observation of her own movements. It might seem that the facts of this case – that Christina’s disabilities result from a loss of somatic feedback, and that she can learn to compensate for this loss, to some extent, by relying on what is incontestably visual perceptual awareness of her own body – show that proprioception itself is a form of perceptual awareness of our bodies, even if this mode of perception is conspicuous to us only in its absence. Moreover, the fact that Christina remains capable of perceiving objects in her environment even when she loses proprioception might be taken to show that her ability to perceive the world around her does not, after all, depend on the availability of non-positional bodily awareness.

I believe, however, that these conclusions are unwarranted. The fact that the abilities Christina loses depend on somatic feedback does not show that they depend on a capacity for sense-perception whose *object* is her body. This is a question about how to conceive of the personal-level cognitive capacity that somatic feedback supports. On the present view, it is a capacity to perceive and engage with her environment under body-relative modes of presentation, rather than a capacity to perceive her own body and experience *it* as such. It is perfectly consistent with this view, and indeed to be expected, that our capacity to perceive and engage with our environment

¹⁷ For more detailed discussion of the phenomenon of deafferentation, see Cole and Paillard 1995.

makes use of somatic feedback: this does not show that our bodies themselves are presented to us in a distinct channel of perceptual awareness. And the fact that Christina can compensate for her deafferentation by watching her own movements does not show this either: it might simply indicate that some of the things she could formerly do *without* relying on positional awareness of her own body can also be achieved, more clumsily, by relying on such awareness.

Christina's loss of proprioception diminishes her capacity to perceive and engage with her environment under body-relative modes of presentation, but it obviously does not undermine this capacity altogether. This stands to reason: although proprioception is a vitally important dimension of our bodily awareness, it does not exhaust such awareness. Christina retains the ability to perceive things as *on her left*, *on her right*, *above her*, *below her*, etc. simply on the basis of vision, which presents the world around her in an egocentric framework that has her body at its origin. She also retains the ability to initiate voluntary movements whose aims must be characterized in body-relative terms: stepping *forward*, reaching for the glass *over there*, etc. Her loss of proprioception diminishes her ability to execute these movements successfully, but her ability to represent her environment in such terms is supported by a lifetime of perceptual and practical engagement with the world around her, and does not simply disappear when somatic feedback is cut off. That she remains able to engage with her environment in these ways does not show that this ability is independent of bodily awareness; it simply shows that this awareness is more robust, and more diverse in its sources, than we might at first suppose.

5. THE PRIMACY OF NON-POSITIONAL BODILY

AWARENESS

So far, my aim has been simply to shed light on what non-positional bodily awareness could be. As we have seen, however, Sartre claims not only that there is such awareness, but that it is primary, whereas “positional” awareness of one’s own body is secondary. But what sort of primacy is at issue here? Is this just a “phenomenological” claim about how things seem? Or are there reasons of principle why the non-positional awareness must be primary? I’ll close with a few words about this.

If the primacy of non-positional bodily awareness were merely phenomenological, a philosopher like Evans might admit the point without making any substantive revisions in his position. Bodily awareness, he might say, has two aspects: it presents extra-bodily things in ways inflected by consciousness of our own bodies, and at the same time, it presents our own bodily condition as such. It may be true, an Evansian could concede, that the former aspect tends to predominate or to be the primary focus of our attention. There may indeed be good reasons for this: excessive attention to our own bodies might cripple world-directed action.¹⁸ But it does not follow that “non-positional” bodily awareness is primary in any deeper sense, or that our bodies are *not* presented as objects in basic bodily awareness. The other aspect might be there all along, whether we notice it or not.

Sartre’s case for the primacy of non-positional bodily awareness is indeed partly phenomenological, but he also offers principled arguments for his position. His primary strategy is to argue that the opposing view leads to a regress:

¹⁸ For discussion, see Dreyfus 2007.

[T]he only action which I can *know* at the same time that it is taking place is the action of Pierre. I see his gesture and at the same time I determine his goal: he is drawing a chair up to the table *in order to* be able to sit down near the table and to write the letter which he told me he wished to write. Thus I can apprehend all the intermediate positions of the chair and of the body which moves it as instrumental organizations; they are ways to arrive at one pursued end. The Other's body appears to me here as one instrument in the midst of instruments... Therefore if I conceive of my body in the image of the Other's body, it is an instrument in the world which I must handle delicately and which is like a key to the handling of other tools. But my relations with this privileged instrument can themselves be only technical, and I need an instrument in order to handle this instrument—which refers us to infinity. (BN, pp. 320-321 (360-361))¹⁹

Sartre's focus in the passage is on the bodily awareness drawn on in action, but he makes a parallel point about the role of awareness of my own sensations in sense perception (BN, pp. 310ff (349ff)). His general idea seems to be that, if my body is presented to me as an object, it must be

¹⁹ Compare also: "I use my pen in order to form letters but not my hand in order to hold the pen. I am not in relation to my hand in the same utilizing attitude as I am in relation to the pen; I am my hand. That is, my hand is the arresting of references and their ultimate end. The hand is only the utilization of the pen" (BN, p. 323 (363)).

presented as something I can perceive and act upon. But, he assumes, my capacity to perceive or act on any object itself presupposes bodily awareness: for, as we have seen, Sartre holds that the objects we perceive and act upon are presented under body-relative modes of presentation, whose availability depends on our awareness of our own bodies. But if this presupposed bodily awareness also presented my body as an object – something whose states I must be aware of by perceiving them and whose limbs I must act upon to move – this would in turn require another, yet-more-basic form of bodily awareness, and so on *ad infinitum*. So although it is possible for me to perceive my own body (e.g., by looking down and seeing my hands on the keyboard) and to act on my own body (e.g., by picking up my left arm with my right), I can do these things only because I have a more basic non-positional awareness of my body that enables me to perceive and to act at all: one in which my body figures, not as an object in my sensory and practical field, but as the locus of my consciousness itself.

A defender of Evans might reply that the notion of awareness of something “as an object” employed in this argument is tendentious. If awareness of my body “as an object” means awareness of it as something I must perceive and act upon it, then it would indeed be implausible to claim that all bodily awareness presents my body as an object. But this point can be granted without prejudice to the thought that there are unreflective modes of bodily awareness that present my own body as an object in a more neutral sense. Suppose I have proprioceptive awareness that *my left leg is bent*, or what action theorists call “practical knowledge” that *I am walking*. These are forms of awareness of my own bodily states and activities that I may have without needing to observe or act upon myself. Nevertheless, they seem to have what we might call “body-

positing intentionality”: they involve representations *of* my body *as* being in a certain condition. So they are representations of my body as an object in the *logical* sense: they make my body a topic of reference and predication. And my body is, of course, a tangible thing in space. That these modes of awareness do not present my body as something I must perceive and act upon is irrelevant.

I think this response focuses the debate on the crucial question: whether our primary mode of bodily awareness represents our bodies as objects in what I have called “the logical sense”. I take Sartre to deny that it does. For the reasons just given, Sartre’s official argument for this conclusion does not settle the question, but I think we can reformulate his point in a way that responds to the Evansian objection just outlined.

The Evansian objection insists that it is possible to have an awareness of oneself as an object that does not rest on self-observation or self-manipulation, and surely this is correct. We must inquire, however, into the preconditions of this kind of self-representation. Proprioceptive awareness that *my leg is bent* and practical knowledge that *I am walking* may not depend on self-observation, but they do presuppose an understanding of myself as a material object, a tangible occupant of objective space. What are the preconditions of this understanding?

Well, as we saw earlier, Sartre holds that our understanding of material objectivity presupposes bodily awareness, since material objects in our environment must be given to our consciousness primarily under body-relative modes of presentation, as here or there, up or down, within or out of reach, etc. If this point is sound, it should apply not just to extra-bodily objects, but to our bodies themselves: to *understand* them as material objects located in space requires understanding them as things we might

encounter and act upon.²⁰ This point holds even if, in a given case, the fact about our own body we are aware of is known without self-observation: still our *comprehension* of this fact presupposes a grasp of our bodies as things that can be encountered and acted upon. And if Sartre is right, this comprehension in turn presupposes the kind of bodily awareness that enables us to represent objects in our environment as here or there, within or out of reach, etc.

A revised version of Sartre's regress argument is now available. It would run as follows: Any awareness of my own body *as an object* requires understanding it to be a material object located in space; but such understanding presupposes a more basic kind of bodily awareness. If this awareness, too, presented my body as an object, it would again presuppose a more basic kind of bodily awareness. But then, on pain of regress, the epistemically basic mode of bodily awareness must not posit my body as an object. So it must be a *non-positional* bodily awareness. Hence any positional bodily awareness presupposes non-positional bodily awareness, and cannot be coeval with it.

On this revised version of the Sartrean argument, the sense in which my body is not presented "as an object" in primary bodily awareness is the logical sense: my body is not an object of reference and predication in such awareness. Thus I am inclined to say – though I am not sure Sartre would accept this way of putting it – that Sartre's claim that my body is not given as an object should be understood logically rather than ontologically. A human body is certainly a material object, but it is not *an object in the*

²⁰ I think Evans would accept this: it is implied in his remarks on the need for our Ideas of ourselves to meet the "Generality Constraint", and on the role of what he calls "the fundamental level of thought" in allowing our self-thoughts to meet this constraint.

logical sense in primary bodily awareness. If, in seeking to understand how our bodies are presented to us, we focus in the first instance on states of consciousness in which our bodies are posited as such, we will be unable to comprehend the foundation on which the very idea of some body's being *mine* rests. This is what I take Sartre to be saying in the famous passage quoted at the beginning of §2.

When I have non-positional bodily awareness, I am of course warranted in making corresponding positional self-ascriptions if the question arises. Consider for instance a state of visual consciousness in which I am presented with a looming door. If the door occupies a progressively increasing portion of my visual field in a certain characteristic way, I may have the warrant to think, on reflection, *I am approaching a door*, a judgment in which I posit myself as a bodily presence in the scene. This judgment may require nothing more in the way of *warrant* than what I have in being conscious of a looming door: I need not observe my own body, or perceive it in some other way. But the judgment does require something more in the way of *understanding* than what is presupposed in consciousness of a looming door: it requires an understanding of myself as a material object in public space. And now two points should be made.

First, it does not seem that the mere capacity for consciousness of a looming door requires such an understanding. There is surely a difference in content between consciousness of *a looming door* and consciousness of *my approaching a door*: the latter draws on more sophisticated intellectual resources than the former. Moreover, psychologists have shown that infants react in appropriate ways to looming presences in their visual field, to “visual cliffs”, etc. But surely infants might react in such ways without yet possessing an understanding of

themselves as material objects in public space. They might simply respond by reflex to looming presences without relying on any general understanding of their own location in space.²¹ So, it seems, they might possess consciousness of a looming door without having consciousness of themselves approaching a looming door.

Second, if the thought *I am approaching a door* is to make genuine reference to a concrete individual, it clearly must imply:

$$(\exists x)(x \text{ is approaching a door})$$

where x ranges over material objects in space. But if Sartre is right, our general understanding of what it is for something to be a material object in space presupposes non-positional bodily awareness. Hence non-positional bodily awareness must be more basic than any positional awareness of myself as such, and cannot be coeval with it.

6. CONCLUSION

Where does this leave the Subject-Object Problem? I think it should make us hesitant to frame this problem, as many contemporary philosophers do, as a question about what accounts for my “experience of ownership” of a body with

²¹ I say they *might* do this because I do not want to make any claims about the actual psychological facts of the case. Whether human infants have a general understanding of space and their location in it is, I suppose, a question for experimental psychology. I do not claim to know the answer to this question *a priori*; my claim is merely that, as a conceptual matter, such understanding is not obviously *required* as a precondition of the ability to be conscious of looming presences.

which I am presented.²² For the upshot of our reflections is that what grounds our most basic experience of embodiment is not some way in which *our bodies* are presented to us at all. If Sartre is right, then there is not some special experience of ownership, at least not if this means some mode in which *our bodies themselves* are experienced. Our most basic mode of bodily awareness is not one in which we experience our own bodies *per se*, but one in which bodily awareness figures, as I have put it, as the medium that informs our consciousness of the world around us. It is our experience of the world *from* a certain body, rather than any particular experience *of* this body, that grounds our sense of being *in* the world, rather than being some kind of transcendent spectator upon it.

One of the main arguments for the existence of a distinctive “phenomenology of ownership” is that it is possible to induce in people an illusion of ownership of limbs that are not actually theirs. In the so-called “Rubber Hand Illusion”, a subject sees a prosthetic hand in front of her being stroked with a feather while her own hand, which is held out of view, is stroked in synchrony.²³ Subjects who undergo this procedure report experiencing sensations as if *in* the rubber hand, and they show other physiological signs of regarding that hand as if it were their own (for instance, they exhibit characteristic physiological threat responses when a sharp blade is brought toward the rubber hand). They commonly describe the experience as one in which the rubber hand is experienced as their own.

Do such experiments show that there is some distinctive “phenomenology of ownership” that normally characterizes our experience of our own bodies, but that can, in special

²² See footnote 4 for references.

²³ For a brief review, see Slater et al. 2009.

circumstances, be induced in respect of an appropriately-placed prosthetic hand? If Sartre is right, it would be more correct to say they show that we can be induced to experience an illusion of feeling *the touch of that feather* (viz., the one seen to be stroking the prosthetic hand, rather than the one actually stroking our own hand). The subject can reformulate this awareness, on reflection, as involving an illusion that their sentience extends to the rubber hand, but in its more fundamental aspect, the illusion is of experiencing the world *from* the standpoint of that hand, not of experiencing the hand itself. Hence there is no need to posit an experience *of the hand* with some special phenomenological character.

I have only scratched the surface of this material. I have not been able to take up Sartre's intriguing remarks on what it is to perceive consciousness in another body (BN pp. 339-351 (379-391)), or his ideas about the role that consciousness of my being-for-others plays in making possible an unreflective but nevertheless positional consciousness of my own body (BN pp. 259ff (298ff)). I think there is a great deal to learn from these discussions, obscure though they are. My project here has been simply to take the first steps toward making this material available for consideration, by bringing out the point of Sartre's idea our bodies are primarily the medium of our consciousness of the objects, rather than objects of consciousness in their own right. If Sartre is right, our bodies, like our states of consciousness themselves, are fundamentally "transparent" to us. They are, as Sartre says, fundamentally "*lived* and not *known*" (BN, p. 324 (364)):

[T]he body can not be *for me* transcendent and known... It would be best to say, using 'exist' as a transitive verb—that consciousness exists its body. (BN, p. 329 (369))

My aim has been to show that, if we are to understand what it is for a person to “experience a certain body as her own”, we must begin by coming to grips with this fundamental Sartrean thought.

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