Embodied subjectivity and objectifying self-consciousness:
Cassam and phenomenology

The main thesis of *Self and World* is stated early on. As Cassam points out in his introduction, according to the "conception of self-consciousness to be defended in the chapters that follow […] introspective awareness of one's thinking, experiencing self as a physical object among physical objects, is a *necessary* condition of self-consciousness" (Cassam 1997: 3). Cassam labels this view 'a materialist conception of self-consciousness' and contrasts it with a widespread view found in the history of philosophy, according to which the self is systematically elusive (Cassam 1997: 1). *Self and World* was published in 1997, and while engaging extensively with the work of Kant, it is unmistakably a work in analytic philosophy. Two years later, my own book *Self-awareness and Alterity* was published. In that book, I engaged with many of the same questions that Cassam discussed, but my interlocutors were primarily French and German thinkers from the 20th century, in particular a number of phenomenologists.

In the following contribution, I will discuss some of the central theses of *Self and World* in the light of debates found in 20th Century German and French philosophy. As we shall see, there are both convergences and discrepancies.

1. The elusive self

Self-consciousness has proven a vexing topic in the history of philosophy. One reason concerns conflicting characterizations of the explanandum. On one influential interpretation, the self – understood formally as the subject of experience – cannot ever be an object of experience. As the neo-Kantian Paul Natorp argued in his *Allgemeine Psychologie nach kritischer Methode*, we have to respect the radical difference between subject and object. The subject is that which stands opposed to all objects, it is that in contrast to which objects are given as objects (*Gegen-stände*). Whereas everything else can be made into an object for consciousness, the subject itself cannot be made into an object, nor can it take itself as its own object. Rather, the moment we start to think of the subject as an object, we stop thinking of it as a subject (Natorp 1912: 8, 28-29, 31).

One way to interpret this line of reasoning is as follows. Whatever self-consciousness amounts to, it cannot take the form of an object-consciousness. For when we are conscious of an object, we are precisely not conscious of ourselves.

This cannot be quite right, though. After all, there seems to be many everyday counter-examples to this claim. If I look in the mirror and realize that I am getting older and that it shows, I am not only intentionally aware of some object, I am precisely aware of myself. To put it differently, mirror self-recognition is a form of self-consciousness, but it is also uncontroversially a form of object-consciousness. On a standard reading, something similar holds true for reflective self-ascriptions. If I have the thought "my head-ache is getting worse", I am not only singling out a specific mental state. I am also taking that mental state as my intentional object, and I am identifying it as my own. This also seems like a straightforward case of objectifying self-consciousness. Is the elusiveness thesis not thereby disproven? As might be expected, this kind of resort is a bit too easy, but it does suggest that it might be necessary with a more careful characterization of the elusiveness thesis. On one reading, the elusiveness thesis states that self-consciousness is not a form of object-consciousness, and that no object-consciousness can qualify as a case of self-consciousness. On another reading, the elusiveness thesis states that the most fundamental form of self-consciousness cannot be a form of object-consciousness, and as a corollary of this, that any self-consciousness which does take the form of an object-consciousness, necessarily relies on and presupposes a type of self-consciousness, which lacks this form.

It is much easier to disprove the first reading than the second reading. More specifically, pointing out that we can be aware of ourselves as physical objects among physical objects, in no way disproves the elusiveness thesis if read in the latter way. I think it is the latter understanding of the elusiveness thesis that is philosophically interesting and worth considering more carefully. It is also this reading that has motivated the reference to a notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness.

2. Pre-reflective self-consciousness

It might be tempting to define self-consciousness (and self-knowledge) as a case where the subject and object of consciousness are identical. But as a famous story by Ernst Mach makes clear, this definition is unsatisfactory. In a footnote in *Beiträge zur Analyse der Empfindungen*, Mach reports how he once after a long night of travel stepped onto a streetcar and when seeing an unkempt bookish looking figure entering from the other end, thought to himself "that is a shabby pedagogue." Only subsequently did he realize that he had been looking in a mirror and seen himself (Mach 1886: 3). When this realization dawned on Mach, he came to acquire a form of self-consciousness that he hadn't possessed at first.

What is the lesson here? In order to qualify as an instance of self-consciousness, it is not sufficient that the subject and the object of consciousness are identical; their identity must also be manifest to the subject in question. Why does this requirement pose a problem for reflective self-consciousness? For the following reason: On a widespread interpretation, reflective self-consciousness is a form of self-consciousness that involves a subject-object relation between two different mental states, the act of reflection and the act reflected upon. Reflective self-consciousness is not simply some form of other-directed mind-reading, however. It does not merely provide the subject of experience with an awareness of somebody's mental episode. As a form of *self*-consciousness, reflection is also supposed to overcome or negate the division or difference between the two states in order to affirm their underlying identity. But how is that supposed to be accomplished? How can the identity of the two relata be ascertained without presupposing that which is meant to be explained? If the reflecting state is to encounter something as itself, if it is to recognize or identify something as itself, it is in need of a prior self-familiarity. As Konrad Cramer put it in an influential article:

> How should the reflective subject be able to know that it has itself as an object? Obviously only by knowing that it is identical with its object. But it is impossible to ascribe this knowledge to *reflection* and to *ground* it in reflection. The act of reflection presupposes that the self *already knows* itself, in order to know that that which it knows when it takes itself as an object is indeed identical with the one that accomplishes the act of reflective thinking. The *theory* that tries to make the *origin* of self-awareness comprehensible through reflection ends necessarily in a circle that presupposes the knowledge it wants to explain (Cramer 1974: 563).

Any attempt to conceive of basic self-consciousness as a form of object cognition, i.e., as a subject-object relation, seems bound to fail since it either leads to a regress or presupposes what it is supposed to explain. In order to recognize a certain object as oneself, one has to hold something true of it that one already knows to be true of oneself. In analytic philosophy, a similar line of thought has been developed by Shoemaker:

> The reason one is not presented to oneself 'as an object' in self-awareness is that self-awareness is not perceptual awareness, i.e., is not a sort of awareness in which objects are presented. It is awareness of facts unmediated by awareness of objects. But it is worth noting that if one were aware of oneself as an object in such cases (as one is in

> fact aware of oneself as an object when one sees oneself in a mirror), this would not help to explain one's self-knowledge. For awareness that the presented object was φ, would not tell one that one was oneself φ, unless one had identified the object as oneself; and one could not do this unless one already had some self-knowledge, namely the knowledge that one is the unique possessor of whatever set of properties of the presented object one took to show it to be oneself. Perceptual self-knowledge presupposes non-perceptual self-knowledge, so not all self-knowledge can be perceptual (Shoemaker 1984: 105).

This reasoning holds true for the case of introspection as well. 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, since no other self could possibly have it, namely the property of being the private and exclusive object of exactly my introspection. This explanation will not do, since 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* that undertakes this introspection. This knowledge cannot itself be based on identification if one is to avoid an infinite regress (Shoemaker 1968: 561-563).

These considerations are not meant to deny the possibility or merit of reflection and reflective self-consciousness. Reflection is both real and cognitively valuable, but the point being made is that it cannot be the most basic form of self-consciousness. If reflective self-consciousness exists, it necessarily presupposes a different type of non-dual self-consciousness that precedes it and constitutes its condition of possibility. A transcendental solution to the challenge sketched above has consequently been to defend the existence of a more primitive form of non-objectifying self-consciousness. Here is how Sartre put it in *L'être et le néant*:

> Thus reflection has no kind of primacy over the consciousness reflected-on. It is not reflection which reveals the consciousness reflected-on to itself. Quite the contrary, it is the non-reflective consciousness which renders the reflection possible; there is a pre-reflective cogito which is the condition of the Cartesian cogito (Sartre 2003: 9).

Sartre is by no means the only thinker who has argued in this fashion. Similar claims are widespread in classical phenomenology and can also be found in Husserl, Stein, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Henry (cf. Zahavi 1999). It is also a view that has been defended by thinkers from other philosophical traditions, such as a group of post-war German philosophers

often known as the Heidelberg School (Henrich 1971, Cramer 1974, Frank 1991), as well as various figures in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophy including Dharmakīrti and Śāntarakṣita (cf. Coseru 2012, MacKenzie 2015, Duckworth 2015).

3. Being an object

Cassam has argued that the plausibility of the claim that self-consciousness and consciousness of something as an object are mutually exclusive modes of consciousness to a large extent depends on what we mean by "object" (Cassam 1997: 5). Not only is this quite true,[1] but it is also fairly obvious that Cassam's use of the term differs from the way his opponents frame the discussion. In *Self and World*, Cassam contrasts the elusiveness thesis with what he calls 'a materialist conception of self-consciousness'. Materialism is typically taken to be a metaphysical position. The claim that self-consciousness cannot in the first instance be a form of object-consciousness is, however, not a metaphysical claim. What is at stake here is not a dispute about whether or not the self is a material being, but rather whether or not my most fundamental awareness of myself involves me being presented to myself as an object. For thinkers like Natorp, Husserl and Sartre, being in possession of objecthood is not an additional substantive property, next to, say, being coloured or heavy. No, to be an object, to possess objecthood, is to be given or presented in a distinct manner. On their reading, something can only be given as an object, if it is experienced as possessing a sort of transcendence. Something is only experienced as an object if it is experienced as transcending its actual appearance, if it is experienced as an identity across difference, as something that can be re-cognized in different experiences. Moreover, object-givenness necessarily entails an epistemic divide, a distinction between that which appears and that to whom it appears, between the object and the subject of experience. For something to be an object of experience is for something to stand over against the subject of experience, and therefore by definition for it to differ from the subjective experience that takes it as an object. This is precisely one of the reasons why object-consciousness has been taken to be a singularly unsuited candidate for basic *self*-consciousness. As we have seen, Cassam defends the view that "Introspective awareness of one's thinking,

[1] In an article dating from the same year as *Self and World*, Galen Strawson defended the claim that the self is not only an object, but a thing as physical as a cow (Strawson 1997: 425). Most phenomenologists would disagree, but sometimes disagreements are more terminological than substantial. This might be one of those cases. As Strawson has subsequently made clear, being an object is for him simply a matter of being in possession of a strong unity (Strawson 2009: 298).

experiencing self as a physical object among physical objects, is a *necessary* condition of self-consciousness" (Cassam 1997: 3). Given the arguments presented above, I would question this claim. Introspective awareness of one's experiencing self as a physical object cannot be a necessary condition of self-consciousness, since the former presupposes a non-objectifying and non-dual form of self-consciousness.

4. Consciousness and self-consciousness

A slightly different version of the same objection is centered around a discussion of what precisely self-consciousness is taken to involve. In *Self and World*, Cassam argues that self-consciousness, in the proper sense of the term, requires consciousness of a self. In other words, for a creature to be self-conscious it is not sufficient that the creature in question is able to self-ascribe experiences on an individual basis without recognizing the identity of that to which the experiences are ascribed. Rather the creature must be capable of thinking of the self-ascribed experiences as belonging to one and the same self. Thus, genuine self-consciousness requires that the creature is capable of being conscious of its own identity as the subject, bearer, or owner of different experiences (cf. Cassam 1997: 117–119). In the discussion of pre-reflective self-consciousness that we find in phenomenology, in the Heidelberg School, as well as in Indian Buddhism, several of these claims are called into question. Not only is the most basic form of self-consciousness not one that involves any (capacity of) self-ascription, since it rather constitutes a condition of possibility for any such self-ascription, but it is also possible to find views according to which self-consciousness rather than entailing any consciousness of self is rather a matter of a certain reflexivity intrinsic to consciousness as such. To put it differently, rather than involving a consciousness of self, self-consciousness is a matter of consciousness being conscious of itself. Here are a few central quotes:

> Every mental act is conscious; it includes within it a consciousness of itself (Brentano 1973: 119)

> The flow of the consciousness […] is so remarkably and yet intelligibly fashioned that a self-appearance of the flow necessarily exists in it […]. The self-appearance of the flow does not require a second flow; on the contrary, it constitutes itself as a phenomenon in itself (Husserl 1991: 88)

> Consciousness has no egological structure; it is not owned by the ego; its acts do not spring from a source or center called the ego. 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).

> This self-consciousness we ought to consider not as a new consciousness, but as *the only mode of existence which is possible for a consciousness of something* (Sartre 2003: 10)

> But in consciousness there is no appearance of anything without something like an appearance of consciousness itself (Henrich 1971: 6)

One way to understand the motivation behind claims like these is to see them expressing a commitment to the idea that self-consciousness – understood as this inherent reflexivity – is an integral and constitutive feature of consciousness. When consciously hearing a sound or seeing a colour, it is not only the intentional object, the sound or colour with its various objectual properties, that is manifest, so is the hearing or seeing. In bringing the world to manifestation, consciousness is simultaneously self-revealing. On such an account, the difference between a conscious and a non-conscious mental state is precisely related to the presence or absence of self-consciousness. I have discussed this claim extensively in previous publications (e.g., Zahavi 1999, 2005, 2014) and cannot pursue or defend it in any detail here. The point I wish to make is simply that on this alternative approach to self-consciousness, where self-consciousness is considered a crucial and integral feature of phenomenal consciousness, any claim to the effect that self-consciousness requires introspective awareness of oneself as a physical object among physical objects would be rejected as strongly counter-intuitive. It would entail that creatures who lack the requisite capacity for introspection, including many

mammals, infants and young children, would also have to be denied phenomenal consciousness.[2]

5. Embodiment and objecthood

A recurrent claim found in *Self and World* is that self-consciousness involves being presented to oneself as a shaped, located, and solid being (Cassam 1997: 3). In chapter 2, Cassam approvingly references Husserl who insisted "that egocentric spatial perception involves a sense of oneself as a *bodily* presence in the world" (Cassam 1997: 53). On the same page, however, Cassam also notes that it "is a striking feature of spatial perception that it carries with it a sense of oneself as a physical object among physical objects" (Cassam 1997: 53). This would certainly not be Husserl's view, as Cassam well knows. For Husserl as well as for other phenomenologists, being aware of one's bodily presence in the world is by no means the same as being aware of oneself as a physical object among physical objects. There are several steps to the argument. Nobody is denying that the body can explore itself. It can take itself (or the body of another) as an object of exploration This is what typically happens in, say, a medical examination. But for the phenomenologists, such an investigation of the body as an object is neither exhaustive, nor does it disclose the most fundamental givenness of the body. Originally, I do not have any consciousness *of* my body. I am not perceiving or objectifying it, I *am* it. The lived body precedes the perceived body. Sartre even writes that the lived body is invisibly present, exactly because it is existentially lived rather than known (Sartre 2003: 348).

[2] There are, however, those who are prepared to bite the bullet on this. According to Carruthers, for instance, to speak of what an experience is like, or of its phenomenal feel, is an attempt to characterize those aspects of experience that are subjective. But to speak of the subjective aspects of experience is to speak of aspects that are available to the subject. What this means, according to Carruthers, is that for mental states to be conscious is for the subject of those states to be capable of discriminating between them. They must be states of which the subject is aware, and for Carruthers, this requires *reflective* self-awareness (Carruthers 1996: 155, 157). For a creature to be capable of discriminating between its mental states is for the creature to be capable of reflecting on, thinking about, and hence conceptualizing its own mental states. This is why Carruthers ultimately argues that only creatures in possession of a *theory of mind* are capable of enjoying conscious experiences or of having mental states with phenomenal feels (Carruthers 1996: 158). Carruthers consequently holds the view that animals (and children under the age of three) lack phenomenal consciousness. In his view, they are blind to the existence of their own mental states; there is in fact nothing it is like for them to feel pain or pleasure (Carruthers 1998: 216; 2000: 203).

When we are perceptually engaged in the world, when we perceive a painting, hold a cup, or use the vacuum cleaner, the body is present, but not as a perceptual object among other objects in space. Rather, insofar as the body is what allows me to adopt a perspective on objects in the world, it is precisely not first and foremost present to me as a perspectivally given object. To claim otherwise is to commence an infinite regress (Sartre 2003: 353; Merleau-Ponty 2012: 93).

This returns us to the claim that self-consciousness involves being aware of oneself as a physical object among other physical objects. To see why this claim is so alien to the phenomenologists, it might be helpful to consider a distinction introduced by Husserl between the personalistic and the naturalistic attitude (Husserl 1989: 147-150). The former attitude is the attitude of our daily life. In this attitude I take the other human being not as a composite of two causally related entities, an external body and an internal mind, but rather as one expressive unit. Through my engagement with others, I also come to apprehend and experience myself as a person among other persons, that is, as a socialized and culturally embedded subject. Next to, and founded upon the personalistic attitude, we find the naturalistic attitude. In this attitude, I approach the other, as well as myself, as a causally determined object among other objects. To come to view others, and oneself, in this manner is certainly possible, but the naturalistic attitude is not the natural attitude, but rather a quite artificial, and highly theoretical perspective. Husserl and other phenomenologists would consequently dispute the attempt to identify our experience of being a person in the world with our experience of being a physical object in the world. As Heidegger puts it in § 12 of *Sein und Zeit*, the *existential* "Being-in" of Dasein and the *categorial* "being in" of things should not be conflated. Dasein is not in the world in the same way that water is in a glass or a t-shirt is in a closet – that is to say, as one extended entity contained within another extended entity (Heidegger 1996: 50). Dasein's being-in-the-world should not be mistaken for the mere innerworldly being of objects. The phenomenologists would consequently disagree with Cassam's claim that the exclusion thesis which states that the subject that thinks is not an object among others in the world is disproven by the fact that thinking subjects are persons and persons evidently belong to the world (Cassam 1997: 171).

Just like Cassam, a phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty would deny that the cogito reveals a pure interiority, a self-enclosed mind. What the cogito reveals is an openness toward otherness. We are in the world, and we only know ourselves in and through our being-in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty is consequently on board with the idea that we are embodied and embedded beings-in-the-world, but he would disagree with Cassam's suggestion that the best way to capture our embodied and embedded self-consciousness is to talk of it as an awareness

of oneself as a subject-object (Cassam 1997: 72). As Waldenfels once pointed out, one difference between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty on this point is that whereas Husserl saw the body as being *both* a subject and object, Merleau-Ponty viewed the body as being *neither* a subject nor an object (Waldenfels 1998: 338). This is also why Merleau-Ponty speaks of the ambiguous nature of the body and argues that bodily existence is a third category beyond the merely physiological and the merely psychological (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 204–5).

6. Conclusion

My brief remarks have not done justice to the many fine-grained analyses and detailed arguments contained in *Self and World*. I have merely focused on a few major themes and argued against the idea that introspective awareness of one's thinking, experiencing self as a physical object among physical objects, is a necessary condition of self-consciousness. As I have made clear, I think introspection and reflective self-ascription presuppose a more fundamental form of pre-reflective self-consciousness. Whereas I welcome the idea that self-consciousness is embedded and embodied, I have rejected the idea that this automatically amounts to an awareness of oneself as a physical object among physical objects. Indeed, rather than seeing the latter form of self-consciousness as basic, rather than considering it an apt way of capturing our fundamental being-in-the-world, I would consider it a very sophisticated and theory-infused form of self-consciousness.

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