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# *Subjectivity as Self-Acquaintance*

**Abstract:** *Subjectivity is that feature of consciousness whereby there is something it is like for a subject to undergo an experience. One persistent challenge in the study of consciousness is to explain how subjectivity relates to, or arises from, purely physical brain processes. But, in order to address this challenge, it seems we must have a clear explanation of what subjectivity is in the first place. This has proven challenging in its own right. For the nature of subjectivity itself seems to resist straightforward characterization. In this paper, I won't address how subjectivity relates to the physical. Instead, I'll address subjectivity itself. I'll do this by introducing and defending a model of subjectivity based on self-acquaintance. My model does not purport to reduce, eliminate, or naturalize subjectivity, but it does make subjectivity more tractable, less paradoxical, and perhaps less dubious to those averse to obscurity.*

## 1. Introduction

One feature of consciousness that many find mystifying is *subjectivity* — that feature whereby there is something it is like *for a subject* to undergo a conscious experience. A lot of philosophers say that subjectivity is mystifying because of its relation to the physical — because it's hard to see how it could arise from the physical goings on in the brain.<sup>1</sup> But subjectivity *itself* can also be mystifying. For it's not clear how to understand the nature of subjectivity or its place in the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Levine (2001), Chalmers (1996), Nagel (1974), and McGinn (1983).

overall structure of consciousness. These two points are distinct, but connected. For in order to address the question of how subjectivity relates to the physical, we must first have a clear sense of what subjectivity *is*.

I won't address how subjectivity relates to the physical in this paper. Instead I will address subjectivity itself. I will do this by introducing and defending a new model of subjectivity based on *self-acquaintance*. No such model currently exists. But some philosophers have nibbled at the idea. William James, for example, says:

[The self of all the other selves] is felt... It is at any rate no mere *ens rationis*, cognized only in an intellectual way... It is something with which we also have direct sensible acquaintance, and which is as fully present at any moment of consciousness in which it is present, as in a whole lifetime of such moments. (James 1890/1983, p. 286)

In a similar spirit, Bertrand Russell somewhat cautiously says, 'It is probable, though not certain, that we have acquaintance with the Self' (1912, p. 80). Gottlob Frege also flirts with self-acquaintance, saying, 'Everyone is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no one else' (1918/1977, p. 333). And, more recently, Saul Kripke endorses and defends Frege's claim, saying:

Each of us does have a special acquaintanceship with himself or herself, as philosophers from Descartes to Frege have held. This self-acquaintance is more fundamental than anything purely linguistic, and is the basis of our use of first person locutions. (Kripke, 2011, p. 319)

So the idea that we are self-acquainted does have some historical pedigree. But it has not yet been developed in any detail. And, as impressive as its history is, it has an equally impressive, and even more voluminous, history of being mentioned and then quickly rejected. One way or another, self-acquaintance has not yet received the attention it deserves. So my goal is to take what James, Russell, Frege, and Kripke find compelling and develop it into a self-acquaintance model of subjectivity. My model does not purport to reduce or naturalize subjectivity,<sup>2</sup> but it does make subjectivity more tractable, less paradoxical, and perhaps less dubious to those averse to obscurity. So even if some reject the particulars of my model (as is

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, for the purposes of this paper, I will remain neutral on the truth of naturalism, reductionism, and also physicalism about consciousness (and thus subjectivity). My model of subjectivity neither presupposes nor entails a position on these issues.

inevitable), I aim to at least exemplify and promote a way of talking about subjectivity that is free from obscurity.

As with any project of this type, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. That is, the ultimate reason to adopt my model will derive from its faithfulness to the manifest nature of subjectivity, its fruitfulness in helping us to better understand what subjectivity is, and its effectiveness as a theory about a very real, very important, and yet very difficult to grasp phenomenon. These are the standards upon which my case will rest.

## 2. Subjects and Subjectivity

As I said, subjectivity is that feature of consciousness whereby there is something it is like for a subject to undergo an experience (*cf.* Nagel, 1974). This is a feature of *our* consciousness. *We* are the subjects in question. That's why subjectivity is often called 'mineness' or 'for-me-ness'. Thus, I take the fact that our experiences have subjectivity to imply that we are the subjects of our experiences. So I take it to imply that we are *subjects*.

What is a subject? Already we are in disputed territory. But in order to understand what subjectivity is, we must understand what a subject is. So this will be my starting point. Following a broadly Aristotelian tradition, I take a subject to be a *bearer of properties*. It is a thing with attributes. Here I am relying on a distinction between *things* (or substances or objects) and their *properties*. Rocks, cars, mountains, cats, trees, and people are things. The *ways* these things *are* constitute their properties. Rocks are *hard*, mountains are *tall*, people are *rational*, etc. So, most generally and fundamentally, I take subjects to be things that bear properties — i.e. things that are certain ways.

Our focus here is on subjects *of experience*. So to say that I am the subject of an experience implies that I bear a certain kind of property — namely, an experiential or *phenomenal* property. If I am in pain right now, I am the bearer of a pain property — painfulness is instantiated in me. To say that I am a subject of experience *in general* — rather than a subject of a particular experience at a particular time — is to say that I am the kind of thing that can, and at least sometimes does, undergo conscious experiences. Thus, I am a subject of experience.

But I am a subject of other properties, too. I am human; I am a certain height; I am sitting, typing, and so on. Thus, being an experienter is just one of the many ways that I am. And to be a subject is not

necessarily to be an experiencer. A red ball, for instance, is a subject of redness and roundness, but it doesn't experience anything. Thus, the first step toward demystifying subjectivity is to understand that to be a subject is just to be a member of a very general, very basic ontological category that includes many other things besides experiencers.

All of this may seem obvious. But many philosophers working on subjectivity eschew the account of subjects that I've just described. And I believe that this is one major source of confusion in the literature on subjectivity. It has led some philosophers working on subjectivity to say a subject is, for example, *experiences* or an *aspect* of experiences (Husserl, 1984, p. 362; Williford, 2006, p. 121), or a *dimension* of experience (Zahavi, 2005, chapter 5), or the way in which experiences are *given* (Henry, 1973; see also Zahavi, 2005, pp. 105–6). And neglect of what an ontological subject is and isn't has led some philosophers to deny that we are subjects because they think this would imply that we are Cartesian egos, 'ego poles', or some other unlikely sort of thing (Natorp, 1912, pp. 102–3; Zahavi, 2005, p. 126).<sup>3</sup> Subjecthood in my sense needn't lead us down any of these dark alleys. In my view, to say that we are properties (or events) is a category mistake. We are *things* — things that *bear* properties. But this doesn't imply that we are Cartesian souls or the like. These further details of our ontology aren't settled by our being subjects.

And yet the claim that we are subjects is not ontologically toothless. It does rule out some views, like those mentioned above. And it also rules out another well-known view — namely the view that we are *bundles of mental states*.<sup>4</sup> On this view, we aren't *subjects* of mental states; rather, we *are* mental states. I'm happy to rule this view out. For I'm with Thomas Reid when he says, 'I am not thought, I am not

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<sup>3</sup> Some philosophers contrast subjectivity with objectivity, and then mistakenly infer from the fact that we are subjects that we couldn't be objects/ontological subjects. I grant that there are important distinctions between the various senses of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'. For instance, there is an important distinction between things that have a *point of view* and things that don't, between truths that depend on one's point of view (or judgment) and those that don't, and between subject awareness and object awareness (see e.g. Shoemaker, 1968; Evans, 2001). But it is a mistake to infer from any of this that subjects are not also objects *ontologically*.

<sup>4</sup> It also rules out *variants* of the bundle theory. For example, Barry Dainton (2008) claims (and Dainton and Bayne, 2005, suggest) that we are *capacities* for consciousness. Since capacities are (arguably) *properties* — namely, dispositional properties — my claim that we are subjects of properties rules out our being capacities for consciousness.

action, I am not feeling; I am something that thinks, and acts, and suffers' (1785/2002, p. 264; see also Unger, 2006, p. 57). I agree. We are not mental states. We are subjects of mental states. We can be *in* mental states. But we are distinct from them.

And, again, I say that what it is to be a subject is to be a thing that bears properties. And I say that to be a subject of experience is to bear phenomenal properties. I do not pretend to have given knockdown arguments against differing views. And I also don't pretend that those who deny that we are subjects wouldn't have interesting things to say in response. I just think their view is wrong, and I think it gets us off on the wrong foot about what we are and what our experiences are like. So I'll only say to those who wish to develop a notion of subjectivity that denies that we are subjects of properties: Godspeed. We part company here.

### 3. What is Mystifying about Subjectivity?

So we are things that bear properties. What's so mystifying about that? The answer: nothing. That we are ontological subjects is neither mystifying nor particularly remarkable. And yet there clearly *is* something remarkable and mystifying about *subjectivity*, which has to do with how our subjecthood figures in consciousness. So it must be for some reason other than that we are ontological subjects. This is what I'll discuss in this section.

If the remarkable and mystifying nature of subjectivity doesn't come from our being subjects, where does it come from? I think it comes from two related sources. First, it comes from the *kind* of subjects we are. We are subjects *of experience*; we are capable of being *consciously aware*. And, as such, we each have our own unique *point of view*. Second, that we are subjects somehow features in consciousness itself; it is part of the very structure of consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I won't insist that this is the only way to understand or categorize what's remarkable and mystifying about subjectivity. However, as I stated earlier, I do think that these issues are connected at least in the sense that in order to understand how there could be subjective experience — or how it relates to the physical — we must understand what subjectivity is. Furthermore, I am also sympathetic to Zahavi and Kriegel's claim (though not their view about what subjectivity is) here: 'Like others (Levine 2001), we think that for-me-ness (or mineness, or subjective givenness) is the most fundamental fact about phenomenal consciousness, is indeed what makes it challenging in the first place. It would be nice to ultimately demystify phenomenal consciousness. But a first step is to identify correctly the source of the mystery. Our contention is that the source

There's a lot to discuss here. But, given my purposes, there are just a few especially salient points that I wish to dwell on. Start with the fact that we subjects of experience are capable of being consciously aware of things. I, for instance, am now consciously aware of my computer screen, the noisy cars out on the street, my coffee, etc. In each case, there is something it is like for me to be aware of some thing or property. Next, we can also be consciously aware of certain of *our own* properties in a way that we can't be aware of other things. The properties I am referring to are *mental* properties — specifically, *phenomenal* properties — and the unique way we can be aware of them is through *introspection*. Right now I am consciously aware of my sensations of my computer, the cars, and my coffee, as well as of a pain in my knee and a feeling of sleepiness. These are all phenomenal properties that I as a subject bear and that I am consciously aware of via introspection. Finally, it's not just that I am consciously aware of these phenomenal properties; I am also aware of them *as mine* — as properties that *I* bear. That is, I am aware that I am their subject.

As platitudinous as these claims about consciousness may seem, they strongly and persistently resist explanation. How there are subjects of experience *at all* — subjects who are capable of being consciously aware of things — is a long-standing philosophical puzzle. It's unclear (to say the least) how subjective experience could arise from brain processes. Another long-standing puzzle concerns how our awareness of our own properties and of ourselves as the subjects of those properties is part of the very structure of consciousness.

So, again, what's remarkable and mystifying about subjectivity isn't the fact that we are ontological subjects. It's rather that we are subjects who can be consciously aware of things (and thus have points of view), and the fact that this conscious awareness includes awareness of ourselves as the subjects of our phenomenal properties.

#### 4. Subjectivity as Self-Acquaintance

In this section I will lay out the remaining essentials of my model of subjectivity. But I will arrive at this destination somewhat indirectly. Instead of leading with the details of my model, I will start by discussing some of what *other* philosophers say about subjectivity. This will allow us to home in on what we should and shouldn't say

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— the most fundamental, most general, most elemental dimension of phenomenal consciousness — is for-me-ness' (Zahavi and Kriegel, 2015, p. 20).

about our target phenomenon. And what will emerge is my own model of subjectivity.

To start with, here's what Dan Zahavi and Uriah Kriegel say about 'for-me-ness' (i.e. subjectivity):

...the 'me' of for-me-ness is not in the first instance an aspect of *what* is experienced but of *how* it is experienced; not an object of experience, but a constitutive manner of experiencing... the 'me' of for-me-ness is not a separate and distinct item but rather a 'formal' feature of experiential life as such... [it is] an experiential dimension of all phenomenal characters that remains constant across them and constitutes the subjectivity of experience. (2015, pp. 4, 5)

Zahavi and Kriegel say that for-me-ness is a *dimension* of experience. Zahavi expounds upon this elsewhere, describing subjectivity as an 'experiential dimension' (2005, p. 115), and glossing this as the view that subjectivity is the 'first-personal givenness of experience' (*ibid.*, pp. 122, 124). He also calls this 'mineness' — that feature common to experiences whereby they are 'characterized by a first-personal givenness that immediately reveals them as one's own' (*ibid.*, p. 124). Here Zahavi acknowledges his debt to Edmund Husserl, who says:

What is most originally mine is my life, my 'consciousness,' my 'I do and suffer,' whose being consists in being originally pre-given to me qua functioning I, i.e., in the mode or originality, in being experientially and intuitively accessible as itself. (Husserl, 1973, p. 429)

Zahavi also cites Michel Henry as holding that 'the most basic sense of self is the one constituted by the very self-givenness of experience' (Zahavi, 2005, p. 125).

My main concern with the above claims is that they don't (at least not obviously) have anything to do with *subjects* or, indeed, *subjectivity*. The way in which my experiences are given to me is, as Husserl (1973, p. 429) suggests, a matter of the way in which they are 'accessible' to me. That is, givenness is a matter of my first-personal access to my own experiences — the way in which I am aware of them. But that I am aware of something doesn't imply that my awareness of it has some self-referential quality — some for-me-ness. By analogy, I might be aware of the house down the street without being aware of its owner. I might even be aware that the house has an owner, and yet not be aware *of* the owner. Likewise, that we have a certain kind of awareness of our experiences doesn't imply that this awareness also comes along with awareness of ourselves as their subjects, or that we as subjects show up or feature in any of our

experiences.<sup>6</sup> So just citing our awareness of our experiences is not enough to capture or explain the subjectivity of those experiences.<sup>7</sup>

One might respond by emphasizing that the way in which we are aware of our own experiences is *unique* — it's unlike our awareness of houses, other people, or anything else. But that, by itself, won't help. For, whether or not our awareness of our experiences is unique, just referencing our *awareness* of our experiences is not enough, since that, by itself, doesn't bring subjects into the picture. Again, by analogy, suppose I tell you that I am aware of the house down the street in a unique way. That, by itself, does not entail that I am aware of the owner of the house (let alone aware of the owner *as* the owner of the house). Likewise, that our access to our experiences is unique, by itself, does not entail that we subjects figure in that awareness.

Now, if the way in which this awareness is supposed to be unique is that it always involves awareness of *ourselves* as *subjects* of those experiences, then we're on to something. But the reason we're on to something is not because we've noted that our awareness of our experiences is unique; rather, it's because we've noted that we subjects feature in consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Unique or not, awareness, access,

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<sup>6</sup> To see this point even more clearly, just think about animal minds. Various animals are consciously aware of things, including at least some of their own experiences (e.g. pains), but it is very unlikely that all such animals are also aware of *themselves* as the subjects of these experiences. This further shows that awareness (including awareness of one's experiences), by itself, does not entail for-me-ness. Thus, it does not explain subjectivity.

<sup>7</sup> One might suggest that my awareness of my experiences — their 'givenness' — by itself yields subjectivity because it is *I*, the subject, to whom these experiences are given. But this still doesn't get us subjectivity. That I am the subject of a property doesn't imply that I experience it as such (or experience it at all!). A property could be *mine* — I could be the one who bears it — without that fact impacting my experiences in any way. And I could be *aware* of this property without its 'mineness' being part of my awareness of it. So unless the fact that I am the subject of my experiences somehow features in *consciousness itself*, the fact that I am the subject of my experiences doesn't get us subjectivity.

Now, one could always deny that this sort of subjectivity exists. That is, one could claim that subjectivity isn't part of consciousness — that in so far as it exists, it consists merely in experiences having subjects. But here I am taking it for granted that subjectivity exists, and that in some form or other it is part of the structure of consciousness itself. If subjectivity in this sense doesn't exist, then it's not mystifying. I — as well as my interlocutors in this paper — assume that there is something there to puzzle over, at least at the outset (see e.g. Zahavi and Kriegel, 2015, pp. 2–3).

<sup>8</sup> Zahavi (2005) does sometimes say things to suggest that our awareness of our experiences is unique in part because it always comes along with self-awareness. But if this is the view (which I commend), then notice that what's crucial here in terms of

givenness, and dimensions of experience aren't what get us subjectivity. For they, by themselves, don't explain how subjects figure in consciousness.

This worry also applies to other views about subjectivity, such as views that identify subjectivity with higher-order thought or perception (see e.g. Carruthers, 2000; Rosenthal, 1986), affectivity (see e.g. Rudrauf and Damasio, 2006), nonwellfoundedness (see Wider, 2006), availability to higher-level cognitive processes (see e.g. Tye, 1995), or the self-(re)presentation of conscious states (see e.g. Williford, 2006; Horgan, Tienson and Graham, 2006; Levine, 2006). These views all identify subjectivity with the way in which we are aware of or undergo our experiences. These views may imply that subjects of experience *exist*. But they do not imply that subjects figure in experience itself.<sup>9</sup> So they don't get us subjectivity.

Here I am criticizing a large swathe of views about subjectivity. That's because I believe that a large swathe of views about subjectivity fail to capture what subjectivity is. But that doesn't mean that these views don't have something going for them. In fact, they highlight something very important about subjectivity. Specifically, their emphasis on our special access to our experiences, and the manner in which we undergo our experiences, is crucial.

Let me expound a bit. It's true that one remarkable thing about us subjects of experience is that, by introspecting, we can be aware of our own phenomenal properties in a unique sort of way. In other words, introspection affords us unique access to our experiences. There are various features of this access that make it unique. One is *privacy*: I alone have introspective access to my experiences. Another is *immediacy*: my experiences are immediately given to me; there's nothing else in virtue of which I am aware of them. This latter notion has been developed in various ways. But I find Russell's (1912) notion of *acquaintance* helpful. One is acquainted with something if

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subjectivity isn't anything to do with *awareness per se*, as Zahavi and Kriegel (2015, pp. 4, 5) maintain; rather, it's to do with *what* we are aware of in consciousness — namely, ourselves. Furthermore, unless Zahavi grants that we are aware of ourselves *as subjects* of our experiences (and he doesn't), then his view still comes up short in terms of explaining subjectivity.

<sup>9</sup> So-called 'self-(re)presentational' theories of consciousness may sound like an exception because of the word 'self'. But here 'self' refers to *mental states*, not subjects of mental states. So the worry applies.

and only if one is *directly aware* of it.<sup>10</sup> There are many things of which I am *indirectly aware* — e.g. the actor on my TV, my mother talking to me on the phone, and arguably even the external objects around me. But, according to most acquaintance theorists, including Russell, I am aware of these things only in virtue of being aware of my *experiences* of them; and it's my experiences with which I am acquainted.<sup>11</sup>

For reasons that will be evident later on, it's worth briefly describing one of Russell's main arguments for the claim that we are acquainted with our experiences. Russell starts by considering a table in front of him, and then says:

My knowledge of the table as a physical object, on the contrary, is not direct knowledge. Such as it is, it is obtained through acquaintance with the sense-data that make up the appearance of the table. We have seen that it is possible, without absurdity, to doubt whether there is a table at all, whereas it is not possible to doubt the sense-data. (Russell, 1912, p. 74)

Russell claims that one can determine whether one is acquainted with something by considering whether one can (without absurdity) doubt that it exists. Russell can doubt that his table exists — perhaps by entertaining some sceptical scenario — but he can't doubt that his experience of the table exists. So he concludes that he is acquainted with his experience, but not the table. This suggests the following test, which I'll call 'The Doubt Test': if one's awareness of some *x* is such that one cannot doubt that *x* exists, then one is acquainted with *x*. Hence, Russell is acquainted with his experience of the table, but the table itself doesn't pass the test.

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<sup>10</sup> The notion of 'directness' in play here has both metaphysical and epistemic elements (*cf.* Gertler, 2012). There is a *metaphysical* element in that the relation of awareness I bear to an object of acquaintance is not mediated by any distinct entity or process. There is an *epistemic* directness here in that if one is acquainted with some *x*, then one can form beliefs about *x* the justification of which depends only on one's awareness of *x*.

<sup>11</sup> Russell's view is that we are acquainted with 'sense-data' and the mental events that constitute our awareness of those sense-data. But most contemporary philosophers, including most acquaintance theorists, reject Russell's metaphysics of experience. So nowadays Russell's main idea is typically stated as the claim that we can be and at least sometimes are acquainted with our *experiences*, whether these are states, objects, or, as I've suggested, properties instantiated by subjects at times. For more about the metaphysics of the acquaintance theory, see Gertler (2012), Chalmers (2003), and Fumerton (1995).

Russell (1912) never explains why The Doubt Test is a good test for acquaintance. But there is a fairly straightforward rationale: if I am aware of some  $x$ , but only in virtue of being aware of some distinct  $y$  that indicates  $x$ 's existence, then I can doubt that  $y$  is a faithful witness, so to speak, to the existence of  $x$  (*cf.* Duncan, 2015; 2017). If a weather report says it's raining, then I can doubt that there is rain because I can doubt that the weather report got it right. Or if I see a table, I can doubt that the table exists by supposing that an evil demon is deceiving me. Thus, in general, for things of which I am (or seem to be) aware, if I am not directly aware of some  $x$ , then I can doubt that  $x$  exists. And from this it follows that if I *cannot* doubt that  $x$  exists, then I am *directly* aware of  $x$  itself rather than some potentially false or misleading presentation of  $x$  that would allow me to doubt its existence.

This further justifies the belief that we are acquainted with our experiences; or, in other words, that our experiences are *given* to us. But, as I've argued, this doesn't get us subjectivity. For subjectivity requires our subjecthood to figure in consciousness itself. And the mere fact that we are acquainted with our experiences doesn't deliver that result.

So we need more. We need another element that brings our subjecthood into the structure of consciousness. Some philosophers have tried to do this by appealing to a *sense of ownership* — a sense that our experiences are owned that goes beyond mere acquaintance with them. The problem is that a sense of ownership, by itself, isn't enough to give our experiences a sense of 'mineness'. It's not enough to make them seem like *my* experiences. For my experiences could seem owned, but *by someone else*. This is what appears to happen when schizophrenics undergo 'thought insertion'. In these cases, schizophrenics experience their thoughts as owned, but they insist that *they* are not the owners. They insist that someone else is the agent or author of these thoughts. Now, my point here isn't to give an interpretation of thought insertion (though I'll return to this in §5). It's just to illustrate that one could experience something as owned without experiencing *oneself* as the owner. Thus, positing a sense of ownership does not give us the full sense of mineness or *self-awareness* that we are looking for.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Some philosophers who posit this sense of ownership go on to characterize it as an experience of *oneself* as the owner of the relevant mental states or actions (see, for

And this *is* what we are looking for. As many philosophers rightly point out, subjectivity is a form of *self-awareness*. Phenomenologists such as Franz Brentano (1874/1973) and Edmund Husserl (1984) are explicit about this. So are Lynn Rudder Baker (2000, pp. 60, 67), Peter Carruthers (1996, p. 152), Uriah Kriegel (2004, p. 105), Jean-Paul Sartre (1957), Robert Van Gulick (2006, p. 11), Kathleen Wider (2006, p. 64), Kenneth Williford (2006, p. 113), Dan Zahavi (2005), and many others. This is crucial. Not because it goes very far in explaining what subjectivity is. After all, there are many ways in which we can be aware of ourselves that have little to do with subjectivity (e.g. looking in a mirror, getting an MRI, talking to a therapist, etc.). Rather, the point that subjectivity is a form of self-awareness is crucial because it indicates that *we* subjects have a place in consciousness — that *we* are part of what we are aware of when we are consciously aware.

Let me now summarize a few key points from the foregoing discussion. Subjectivity is a structural feature of consciousness whereby we subjects figure in consciousness itself. And subjectivity is thus a form of self-awareness. And this awareness somehow involves certain features characteristic of our access to our inner lives — privacy and immediacy — the latter of which I have cashed out in terms of acquaintance.

I think the best way to respect the above points is to make use of resources already available to us. It is to extend the notion of acquaintance to *ourselves*. It is to adopt a *self-acquaintance* model of subjectivity. On this model, subjectivity is acquaintance with — that is, direct awareness of — oneself as the subject of one's experiences.

Although no one has defended this view in detail before now, the idea that we are self-acquainted is not new. Russell (1912, pp. 79–80), for example, talks favourably about the idea. So do Frege (1918/1977), Kripke (2011), and James (1890/1983). But, as I've said, this idea has been ignored or dismissed far more often than it has been pursued.

So let me now go into some more detail. Subjectivity is self-acquaintance. It is direct awareness of oneself as the subject of one's

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example, Gallagher, 2000; Stephens and Graham, 2000; Billon, 2011; Guillot, 2013). I have no quarrel with these philosophers. My present point is just that positing a sense of ownership *by itself* — that is, without also positing a sense of *self* as owner — is not sufficient to capture the sense of mineness or self-awareness that we are looking for here.

experiences — as the bearer of phenomenal properties. This implies that subjectivity is *unmediated* self-awareness. It is unmediated by awareness of anything else, such as behaviour, descriptions, thoughts, etc. This is at odds with various accounts of self-awareness, including those that say we can be introspectively aware of ourselves only *indirectly*, in virtue of being aware of our mental states (see e.g. Howell, 2006). I don't deny that we *can* be aware of ourselves indirectly. After all, I can be aware of myself by looking in a mirror, getting an MRI, or attending to my mental states. But, on my view, the most basic form of self-awareness is direct.

Self-acquaintance makes its own distinctive contribution to the qualitative character of one's total phenomenal experience. There is something that it is like to be directly aware of oneself. And this what-it's-like-ness is distinctive; it is *unique*; it is unlike the phenomenal character of any other experience. Part of what makes it distinctive is that it has a certain content: it is an experience of a *self* — a subject of experience. But that can't be all. For we experience other subjects of experience as well — namely, each other. So I tentatively suggest that what's responsible for the experiential distinctiveness of self-acquaintance — what makes it different from the experience of other subjects of experience — is the *immediacy*, *introspectability*, and *privacy* of this form of self-awareness. I am the only subject of which I am *immediately* aware. I am the only subject of which I am *introspectively* aware (this may be necessary — even true by definition). And although I am aware of other subjects of experience, I am not aware of them *as* subjects of experience in the same way that I am privately aware of myself as a subject of experience. For I am not privately aware of others' mental states or the relation between them and their mental states. All of this yields the result that what it's like to be acquainted with myself is unlike what it's like to be aware of other people, objects, or properties.

Self-acquaintance is achieved via introspection. But self-acquaintance doesn't require much *attention*. In this regard, self-acquaintance is akin to our awareness of our experiences and our awareness of objects of perception. Perception typically involves awareness of properties and objects that one is not focusing on or carefully attending to.<sup>13</sup> Right now I'm focusing on my computer screen, but I

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<sup>13</sup> Which is not to say that perceptual awareness requires *no* attention. Cohen, Alvarez and Nakayama (2011), for example, argue that even peripheral perceptual awareness

am also aware of the books on my desk and the pictures on my wall. These items are in the *periphery* of my perceptual awareness. This is similar to my awareness of my experiences. Although I am constantly aware of my experiences, it's rare that I focus on or carefully attend to them. They are in the periphery. I suggest that self-acquaintance is no different. Most of the time we are effortlessly acquainted with ourselves. Most of the time self-acquaintance is non-reflective or *peripheral/non-focal* self-awareness (*cf.* Kriegel, 2004; Goldman, 1970, p. 96; Ford and Smith, 2006).

There is a question as to whether self-acquaintance is part of *every* human experience (maybe even of necessity). I believe that *subjectivity* is part of every human experience, and may be so of necessity. So, given that I believe subjectivity is self-acquaintance, I believe that self-acquaintance is part of every human experience. However, this is a difficult issue. And the essentials of my model do not rest on whether there are or could be exceptions — that is, experiences without subjectivity and, thus, without self-acquaintance.

These are the essential facets of my model of subjectivity. Now, is there anything remarkable or mystifying about any of it? Once again, that we are consciously aware *at all* is remarkable and mystifying. But is there anything in my model of subjectivity *in particular* that is remarkable or mystifying? It is perhaps remarkable that, somehow, in consciousness, we are not only aware of external objects, we are also (directly) aware of ourselves, our mental properties, and our relation to those properties. But I don't see anything particularly *mystifying* about this. The main concepts in play here are: *subject* (of experience) and *acquaintance*. We've already seen that there is nothing mystifying about ontological subjects. Some report finding the notion of acquaintance mystifying. But, on my view, acquaintance is just direct awareness. Setting aside once again the difficulty of understanding conscious awareness, which is beyond the scope of this paper, all I've added is *directness*. Readers can decide for themselves whether they find this concept mystifying. But I trust that it is at least an

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requires some attention, for they found that subjects who were given a demanding task were prone to inattentional blindness. Here I remain neutral on how much attention is required for awareness. I just assume that we can be aware of at least some things that we are not carefully attending to or focusing on (which is widely accepted, and also obvious). I also remain neutral on the nature of this peripheral awareness (e.g. what it takes to be peripherally aware, what it's like in terms of its fine-grainedness or detail, whether it is especially prone to cognitive penetration, etc.).

improvement in clarity on this topic — progress toward demystifying subjectivity.

In the next section I will consider several objections to my model of subjectivity. But before doing so I want to lay out one further, positive, reason to believe that we are acquainted with ourselves — that is, a reason beyond the fact that doing so leads to an attractive and tractable view of what subjectivity is. To appreciate this reason, recall Russell's (1912) Doubt Test for acquaintance. According to Russell, one is acquainted with something if one's awareness of it is such that one cannot doubt that it exists. So, for example, Russell is acquainted with his experience of his table, because he cannot doubt that this experience exists, but he can't say the same about the table itself, because he can doubt that it exists.

Now, our concern is whether we are acquainted with *ourselves*. So we have to apply The Doubt Test to ourselves. Elsewhere I've argued that we pass The Doubt Test (see Duncan, 2015). So I will not go into too much detail here. But the short of it is this: I, like Descartes, cannot doubt my own existence. An evil demon could be tricking me about all sorts of things, but it couldn't be tricking me about that. One barrier to scepticism about my own existence is purely logical: an evil demon couldn't trick *me* into falsely believing that I exist, since I have to exist in order to be tricked.<sup>14</sup> But we can bracket this purely logical barrier to scepticism and ask whether, on the basis of my self-awareness, I can rule out all sceptical scenarios in which I do not exist. And the answer is still: yes. For a little reflection reveals the absurdity in the idea that I might not be the one who is occupying this particular mental perspective that I seem to be occupying right now. The issue isn't with the idea of another person (or no one at all) undergoing experiences that are qualitatively similar or even identical to my experiences. The issue is with the idea that someone else (or no one) might turn out to be occupying *this* particular perspective and undergoing *these* particular experiences that I seem to be undergoing right now. That's what seems absurd. I am inseparable from my perspective and the way things seem from my perspective. So there is no

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<sup>14</sup> Descartes (1643/1993) seems to suggest this line of reasoning. However, many Descartes scholars deny that Descartes ever meant to express an inability to doubt his own existence for these purely logical reasons. They contend that his expressed inability to doubt his own existence is, in every instance, an expression of a more robust apprehension of his own existence. See e.g. Hintikka (1962) and Williams (1978, chapter 3).

sceptical scenario in which things seem as they do *here* and yet in which I do not exist. Thus, in this way, I cannot doubt that I exist.

There's plenty more to discuss here (see Duncan, 2015). But, already at this point, we have at least *prima facie* reason to believe that we pass The Doubt Test. So, given the plausibility of The Doubt Test, we have *prima facie* reason to believe that we are acquainted with ourselves. This is a further reason to buy into self-acquaintance.

But now didn't David Hume famously deny that he could find himself in experience by introspecting? And isn't that enough to show that we can doubt our own existences? The quick answer is: no. That Hume couldn't find himself by some particular means doesn't imply that he could doubt his own existence.<sup>15</sup> And even if it did, The Doubt Test is a first-personal test for acquaintance, and so we must each assess the results for ourselves (see Duncan, 2015). And those of us who think there is such a thing as subjectivity (a view I'm assuming for the purposes of this paper) should be especially receptive to denying Hume's claim about experience. But this gets us into a broader set of issues — including ones involving Hume's claim — that are the focus of the next section. So let's turn there now.

## 5. Objections

No one until now has developed an acquaintance model of subjectivity or self-awareness. The idea that we are acquainted with ourselves has received some speculative support (e.g. Russell, 1912; Kripke, 2011; Frege, 1918/1977; James, 1890/1983). But mostly it has been ignored or dismissed. This is for three main reasons. In this section I will address each of them, and show that they are not good reasons to deny that we are self-acquainted.

The first reason self-acquaintance has been ignored is because there is a suspicion that our being self-acquainted would require some unseemly metaphysics — specifically, it would require us to be Cartesian egos or something of the like.

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it's debatable whether Hume (1739/1975) ever really doubted (or expressed doubts about) his own existence. It's true that he says he couldn't find himself by introspecting, but, again, that only implies that he couldn't find himself by some particular means. He also at one point identifies himself (and each other person) with a bundle of experiences (Liv.6), but that isn't so much a denial of his existence as a claim about what he is. What's more, later on (in the Appendix) he expresses dissatisfaction and uncertainty about these views regarding the self and self-experience.

But I hope it's clear by now that this is mistaken. That we are self-acquainted implies almost nothing with respect to our ontology. As I've argued (§2), that we are subjects does not imply that we are Cartesian egos or anything similar. Subjects form a very general, very inoffensive ontological category. So *direct awareness* of subjects only saddles us with unwanted metaphysical baggage if it implies or reveals something *further* about our ontology. But plausibly, it doesn't. What we can learn about our ontology from introspection is quite limited. Self-acquaintance reveals that we are subjects of experience — that is, bearers of phenomenal properties. But that's about it. This hardly implies that we are Cartesian egos or the like.

The root of this mistake seems to be in drawing an illicit inference from *how* we are aware of ourselves to a conclusion about *what we are* — that is, about our ontological nature. For example, it has been argued that since we aren't aware of ourselves *as* physical bodies, we aren't physical bodies (or else we aren't self-aware; Anscombe, 1994). But that we aren't always aware of ourselves as bodies doesn't imply that we aren't bodies. It only implies that we aren't always aware of ourselves as such. The fallacy here is the move from 'I am not aware of x as such-and-such' to 'x is not such-and-such'. So when I say that in self-acquaintance I am aware of myself as a subject of experience but that's about it, this doesn't imply that a subject of experience is all I am. And it doesn't imply that I am non-physical. So my point is this: self-acquaintance doesn't license the inference that would be required to move from self-acquaintance to unseemly metaphysics. So self-acquaintance doesn't saddle us with unseemly metaphysics.<sup>16</sup>

The second reason self-acquaintance has been ignored is because it is often associated with an ill favoured view — namely, the view that our normal procedure for self-attributing mental states relies on our *introspectively identifying* ourselves. Sydney Shoemaker (1994), among others, criticizes this view, saying that our mental self-attributions couldn't rely on self-identification, since identification always goes hand-in-hand with the possibility of *misidentification*; and yet, we are immune from misidentifying ourselves when we self-attribute mental states. This is considered a problem for self-

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<sup>16</sup> To put an even finer point on it: self-acquaintance *itself* doesn't saddle us with any unseemly metaphysics. But there's still the question of what is required, in terms of underlying ontology, for us to be self-acquainted subjects of experience. To answer this question would be to answer, among other things, what underlying ontology is required for *consciousness*. As I've said, I have no answer to that question.

acquaintance. It's not that the claim of self-acquaintance *entails* any particular view about mental self-attribution (it doesn't). Rather, it's that many philosophers see an evident explanatory connection between self-awareness and mental self-attribution. So, understandably, there is an expectation that claims like *we are self-acquainted* will inevitably run into Shoemaker's objection.

However, there are some plausible responses. One is to say that introspective self-identification is simply a special case of identification — one that is immune to error. After all, there's never anyone else with whom I am acquainted as the subject of my experience for whom I could mistake myself introspectively.

But I prefer a different response. I grant that self-attributions do not typically rely on self-identification. I say that self-acquaintance, and the relation between ourselves and our mental states, is normally taken for granted — simply assumed as a background feature of our experiences, and only questioned when significantly altered or impaired (as in cases of mental disorder). This is perfectly consistent with the claim that we are self-acquainted, and indeed, with the claim that self-acquaintance plays a fundamental role in self-awareness and mental self-attribution. The role of self-acquaintance in a theory of self-awareness is its role in the *acquisition* and *development* of first-personal concepts, and its non-focal role in the maintenance and deployment of those concepts. I believe that such a theory can explain various phenomena associated with basic self-awareness. But my present point is just this: the way to deal with Shoemaker's objection is to grant his main point and then point out that it's compatible with self-acquaintance. Then the worry disappears.

The third, and to my mind primary, reason self-acquaintance has been ignored or dismissed is because it runs afoul of Hume's (1739/1975) aforementioned claim about introspection:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. (I.iv.6)

A lot of philosophers agree with Hume that, when we introspect, all we find are various mental states — we don't find any extra *subject* of experience that we might call 'the self'. Shoemaker even goes as far as to say that Hume's claim has 'commanded the assent of the majority of subsequent philosophers who have addressed the issue' (1994, p. 188). I am not as confident as Shoemaker that Hume's claim

about introspection really is quite so widely accepted.<sup>17</sup> But certainly it enjoys significant popularity.

Even so, I believe that we should reject Hume's claim. I grant that there is a certain allure to the idea that introspection reveals nothing but mental states. Indeed, as I've said, I believe that this is the most significant challenge for a self-acquaintance model of subjectivity to overcome. Still, I believe that the first step in dealing with this challenge is to say: Hume was wrong. The self does show up in consciousness.

The next step is to support this claim with arguments. So let me just conclude by offering four reasons why we (especially those of us interested in subjectivity) should be receptive to rejecting Hume's claim. The first is, ironically, phenomenological. To me (and others), it seems clear that consciousness is not a mere collection of anonymous experiences strung together in succession. There is more to consciousness. My experiences are experienced as *mine*, and this 'for-me-ness' is a further aspect of experience. (How else could I tell my experiences from others'? What else could make *these* experiences manifestly *mine*?) This may sound like I'm just registering my disagreement with Hume. And to a certain extent that's true. But let me just add this: this paper is about what subjectivity is. So I have assumed that there is such a thing as subjectivity, and that it is part of the structure of consciousness. Anyone who has followed me this far should be at least somewhat sympathetic to my description of consciousness in response to Hume. That there is subjectivity implies that there is a whole other aspect of experience beyond individual mental states. It is a distinctive 'for-me-ness'. It is self-awareness. It is *me* figuring in my experiences. So anyone who buys that there is subjectivity should be poised on phenomenological grounds to reject Hume's claim.

Now, as I've said, a range of philosophers who work on subjectivity defend views that do not imply that subjects feature in consciousness itself. So these philosophers may (and often do) contend that their views are consistent with Hume's claim. But, as I've argued (§4), that these views fail to explain how subjects feature in consciousness is among their *shortcomings*. So I say that in so far as these views stay

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<sup>17</sup> More than a few philosophers at least register their disagreement with Hume's claim, including Chalmers (1996, p. 10), Strawson (2000), Bayne (2008), Kriegel (2004), and Swinburne (1985).

true to Hume's claim, they forsake subjectivity. With that said, I'm not sure these views really *do* stay true to Hume's claim. For even if they agree with Hume that introspection does not reveal a substantial self, the idea that there is an experiential dimension of subjectivity — a 'for-me-ness' — runs afoul of Hume's claim that all there is to experience is a succession of mental states. Philosophers ought to own up to this. If you think there is genuine subjectivity, then you think there is something *more* to experience than a succession of anonymous mental states. So, again, anyone who buys into subjectivity should be receptive to parting ways with Hume.

The second reason we should be receptive to rejecting Hume's claim is that recent research on mental disorder casts considerable doubt on it. In particular, certain disorders of consciousness appear to involve breakdowns in self-experience in a way that suggests that self-experiences are normally present (*cf.* Sass, 2000, p. 154; Frith, 1992, p. 80; Billon, 2014). Consider, for example, the phenomenon of *thought insertion* found among schizophrenics. People who suffer from thought insertion believe that some of the thoughts they experience come from external agents. It's not just that they believe that others are controlling or influencing their thoughts; they believe that others are actually thinking/bringing about those thoughts. On what's now the leading account of this phenomenon, thought insertion essentially involves a breakdown in the experience of oneself as the author/agent of one's thoughts.<sup>18</sup> In other words, in these *abnormal* cases, the self fails to show up in experience in the role of author/agent of one's thoughts, resulting in a significant experiential deficit. This suggests that, in *normal* cases, the self does show up in experience in the role of author/agent of one's thoughts.<sup>19</sup> Similar arguments can and have been made through appeal to other pathological

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<sup>18</sup> Lynn Stephens and George Graham (2000) were among the first to develop this account, which has gained fairly widespread support among philosophers and psychologists who study schizophrenia (see e.g. Coliva, 2002; Radden, 1999, p. 355; Gallagher, 2000; Bayne, 2004; Kriegel, 2004, p. 189). But even if their account is wrong in certain details — e.g. that thought insertion involves a sense of *agency* — the evidence from this phenomenon would still cut against Hume's claim as long as it indicates that we normally have self-experiences.

<sup>19</sup> Which is not to say that those who experience inserted thoughts completely fail to experience themselves. Stephens and Graham (2000), as well as others, carefully argue that although these patients fail to experience themselves as the *authors/agents* of their thoughts, they still experience themselves as the *subjects* of their thoughts (see e.g. pp. 126–7, 153).

phenomena.<sup>20</sup> And what these arguments suggest is that Hume is wrong — experience is not just a succession of mental states; it also includes a sense of self.

Now, we still have a lot to learn about disorders of consciousness. And although I have described the currently dominant account of thought insertion, other accounts of this phenomenon are out there. That being said, the evidence from mental disorder *is* suggestive. It appears to support a plausible abductive argument against Hume's claim about experience. So it should at least make us receptive to rejecting Hume's claim.

The third reason we should be receptive to rejecting Hume's claim is that there are other plausible explanations for why it might *seem* like introspection doesn't reveal a self. First, self-acquaintance is *ubiquitous*. It's always there. And because it's ubiquitous, it's less noticeable. It fades into the background like the continuous hum of an air conditioner. Second, self-acquaintance is typically in the *periphery* of our consciousness (§4). We don't usually focus on or carefully attend to ourselves. Perhaps we never do. Perhaps we can't (*cf.* Peacocke, 2014, chapter 3). Finally, self-acquaintance doesn't reveal much about the self. I am acquainted with myself as the subject of my experiences, but that's about it. So self-acquaintance isn't as comprehensive as one might expect. These points deserve further development. But my point here is just this: that it may seem like we can't find ourselves in consciousness — that the self is 'elusive' — can be explained without accepting Hume's claim. This makes rejecting Hume's claim more palatable.

The fourth and final reason we should be receptive to rejecting Hume's claim is, well, *my arguments in this paper!* That we are self-acquainted undergirds a clear and attractive theory of subjectivity. It is evidenced by our certainty of our own existences. And, with a little work, it can overcome its most prominent objections. These are good reasons to accept that we are self-acquainted. Thus, they are good reasons to reject Hume's claim that we are not self-acquainted. At the very least, they should make us receptive to doing so.

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<sup>20</sup> These include schizophrenics' experiences of alien voices and delusions of control (see Frith and Johnston, 2003, chapter 7; Stephens and Graham, 2000; Bayne, 2008), depersonalization disorder (see Billon, 2014), Cotard's delusion (see Billon, 2014), and anarchic hand syndrome (see Bayne, 2004; 2008; Campbell, 2002).

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