

Review of *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness* by Kathleen V. Wider, Cornell University Press, 1997, 207 pp.

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Sartre believed that “all consciousness is self-consciousness.” In *Being and Nothingness* he attempted to show the truth of this assertion. His phenomenological analysis of consciousness distinguishes among several types of consciousness—for example, reflective and prereflective, pure and impure—and explores the ways each of these types is essentially reflexive. His analysis exposes what appear to involve contradictions in the nature of consciousness; he attempts to resolve these with the help of the well-known claim that consciousness is in itself a “nothingness.”

Is Sartre’s analysis coherent? Wider believes that it is not. Is it, nevertheless, useful? Wider believes that it is; that Sartre made original contributions to our ability to identify and describe many real and universal features of conscious experience. One of these is the relation between consciousness and embodiment. While the view that all consciousness is self-consciousness goes back to Descartes, the view that consciousness essentially involves the experience of being a body in the world is more recent. Descartes and other dualists would deny it. Sartre is one of a number of phenomenologists and existentialists for whom embodiment is important, but only for Merleau-Ponty is it more central than for Sartre. Sartre’s unique position is the combination of the view that the body is the subject of consciousness with the Cartesian view that because consciousness is self-conscious it is nonsubstantial and essentially separate from the objective world. Wider argues that this position is fundamentally as self-contradictory as it sounds. She also argues, however, that many features of Sartre’s phenomenological analysis of consciousness as self-consciousness can be justified by recent work in cognitive science and biology, as well as philosophy of mind, that demonstrates the role of embodiment in consciousness.

Wider’s discussion is coherent, detailed, and fascinating, and her account of recent work on consciousness and embodiment is well informed. A major strength of her book is its clarity, both organizational and conceptual. She writes in a direct and unpretentious style, and presents frequent summaries and reminders of earlier points, so the intricacies of the argument are easy to follow. And her demonstration of the relation of contemporary work to that of Sartre is convincing. If Sartre had read this book, it is easy to believe that he would have been persuaded to amend his account. The book is useful also for its clear delineation of certain philosophical problems that

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remain unresolved. Some of these involve the interpretation of recent neuroscientific findings, such as the blindsight phenomenon; presumably empirical progress will clarify these matters. My only serious objection is that while Wider is exceptionally clear in everything she says about consciousness, and in the ways the term is used in various contexts, she does not identify a common thread or set of elements in the concept as it is used by the writers discussed. It is easy to read the book without noticing this, because each perspective on consciousness, as it is discussed, is self-consistent. This absence of a general definition of consciousness is discussed at various points in what follows.

Wider's book is a very valuable addition to the literature on the role of embodiment in human experience. Cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind are increasingly recognizing that the computational paradigm for consciousness and intentionality is inadequate, and that understanding these phenomena requires considering people as embodied and situated in a world in which they act and interact. The mind is, in Andy Clark's (1996) words, "embodied and embedded" in the world, and cannot be explained apart from this. This recognition has included a new respect for the phenomenologists, like Sartre, who sought to understand embodied experience long before the siren song of computationalism was heard. Wider shows with crystal clarity exactly how Sartre's work is in part relevant, and in part irrelevant, to this project in its most recent incarnation.

The book begins with a chapter about Descartes, Locke and Kant, all of whom held that all consciousness is self-consciousness. Wider's discussion includes well-informed recognition of contemporary scholarship. Each of the three philosophers shares some views with Sartre, but they are different views, and none identifies consciousness with bodily awareness. The differences prevent one from deriving any common definition of consciousness from these analyses.

Descartes shares with Sartre the belief that there are two levels of self-consciousness; Wider suggests that Descartes' distinction can be described in Sartre's terms as *prereflective and reflective* self-consciousness. This distinction, Wider shows, resolves a contradiction seen in Descartes between his implication that "thought is not something of which we are *always* conscious" and his claim that there is no thought in us "of which we are not conscious at the moment it is in us" (Wider, p. 11). Reflective self-consciousness, unlike prereflective, involves paying attention to what we are conscious of. This means that consciousness is not to be identified with attention; it might, however, be a type of knowledge. Wider endorses Margaret Wilson's argument that for Descartes consciousness is knowledge, and the prereflective/reflective distinction could be seen as one between implicit and explicit knowledge. An important difference remains: "Consciousness, for Descartes, is the mind's awareness of its activity. For Sartre it is the body's presence to the world" (p. 14).

Where Descartes and Sartre see two levels of self-consciousness, prereflective and reflective, Locke sees a continuum of degrees of self-consciousness. Another difference is that unlike them, for Locke the mental is not the same as the conscious; unconscious ideas exist in the mind. This means that self-consciousness involves two mental acts: a thought, and a perception of that thought. Thus while it is possible to say of Locke that all consciousness is self-consciousness, it is not possible to identify

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consciousness either with the mental or with knowledge, since perception and thought can occur without consciousness, and thus the basic concept of consciousness remains frustratingly elusive.

Like Descartes, Kant posits two distinct levels of self-consciousness, transcendental apperception and empirical self-consciousness; he also agrees with Sartre that the former is a necessary foundation for the latter. The issue of whether, and in what way, Kant's transcendental apperception is self-consciousness, is a controversial one. From her analysis of the arguments of several commentators, Wider concludes that Kant's view of the self-consciousness of consciousness is further from Sartre's than that of Descartes. For Kant transcendental apperception is self-conscious only in acting to form a representation of an enduring self, while for Sartre prereflective self-consciousness is a type of perception, an awareness rather than a synthesizing act.

Once again, therefore, while Wider clearly establishes a tradition for the claim that all consciousness is self-consciousness, she has not shown that the subject matter of the claim—a kind of thing we call “consciousness”—has a consistent history. One might therefore object that the discussion of the tradition adds nothing to our knowledge of what consciousness is, in the same way that a discussion of historical views of “the Heavens” in terms both of a dome with holes in it and a void containing stars and planets would fail to illuminate the actual nature of the cosmos. That comparison would be unfair, however. Unlike the nature of the cosmos, the nature of consciousness seems to be accessible at least in part through subjective experience, and the various analyses are based on what is presumably a common phenomenology. For that reason, both the agreements and the disagreements on the nature of consciousness can shed valuable light on the experience itself, through the various interpretations to which it lends itself. In showing that self-consciousness is bodily self-consciousness, Wider shows how it is that these various philosophers could both agree and disagree so radically.

Chapters 2 through 4 examine Sartre's own theory of consciousness, as presented primarily in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre's basic position, Wider argues, is the following:

Consciousness is directed toward objects, its existence is dependent on its positing of an object transcendent to consciousness and not on its being known by itself. . . . However, Sartre still wishes to maintain the Cartesian thesis that all consciousness is self-consciousness. So he argues that consciousness of consciousness is initially pre-reflective, not reflective; that is, it is consciousness conscious of itself as consciousness of an object. Self-consciousness at the pre-reflective level is “an immediate, non-cognitive relation of the self to itself” (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. liii). (Wider, p. 45)

Self-consciousness is not self-knowledge, which would imply a separation between knower and known. “Self-consciousness at the pre-reflective level is one with the consciousness of which it is conscious” (Wider, p. 45). Because Sartre rejects the accounts of the nature of self-consciousness of Descartes, Locke, and Kant—accounts that treat consciousness either as knowledge or as the synthesis of a representation—his position appears paradoxical: what could self-consciousness possibly amount to, if there is no separation? His answer is that consciousness is nothingness. Self-consciousness can exist because a being is present to itself; but that

requires that the Law of Identity not apply to that being: a self-conscious being IS NOT itself. This type of being, termed the “for-itself,” is in contrast to the type of being that is identical with itself: the “in-itself.”

But what sense can be made of the claim that self-consciousness is nothingness? Sartre’s general explanation invokes relations between the conscious subject (the “for-itself”) and other things from which the subject distinguishes itself in order to be self-conscious. Some of these are: the “in-itself” (nonconscious spatial objects that *are not* oneself); other conscious beings (the “other”); past and future states of oneself that are *not* present; goals of action that have *not* been attained; and even oneself as seen by the “other,” making oneself into an object, an in-itself, for the other.¹ Consciousness of the self as NOT BEING these other things is the essential nothingness of consciousness that makes freedom possible: consciousness must distinguish itself from these potential determinants, and “tear itself away from its past” in order to make that past into a motivation for action. The past alone cannot determine action without the recognition of an ideal future state that is a negation of the present state and the past state as well. This negation is a transcendence of the causal order of the world, and constitutes human freedom. Sartre’s account at this level of analysis is not obviously inconsistent, but the notion of self-consciousness as nothingness is opaque.

At the beginning of Chapter 3, Wider asks “What does self-consciousness come to for Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*?” She explores this question by examining the several levels of self-consciousness posited by Sartre: pre-reflective self-consciousness, pure and impure reflective self-consciousness, and self-consciousness as being-for-others. The primary distinction among these levels is between the attempt of consciousness to grasp itself as an object (in being-for-others and impure reflection) and its attempt to grasp *itself as consciousness of the world*, in pure reflection and pre-reflective consciousness. Wider’s main argument in this chapter is that both of these attempts fail, but that while the failure in the former case is recognized by Sartre, the failure in the latter case is not. Sartre is unable to distinguish clearly among the various levels and types of consciousness, even in his own terms. Wider concludes the chapter by anticipating her solution to Sartre’s problem: it is only by recognizing self-consciousness as bodily that the internal inconsistencies can be resolved.

In Chapter 4 Wider considers some possible counterexamples, based on empirical observations, to Sartre’s claim that all consciousness is self-consciousness. One of them is dreaming, in which dreaming consciousness ought, on Sartre’s thesis, to be consciousness of dreaming. Whether dreaming is a genuine counterexample depends upon whether dreaming can be considered as consciousness, a question Wider leaves unresolved. Two other possible counterexamples come from recent work. One is Armstrong’s Long Distance Truck-Driver case, in which a driver “comes to” and realizes that he has been driving while apparently unaware of doing so. The other is blindsight, a phenomenon in which patients with damage to the striate cortex can detect visual stimuli while denying that they see anything at all. If

¹ This “negating” function of consciousness is made clearer in Sartre’s *Psychology of the Imagination* (1948/1966).

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Sartre treats these cases as cases of consciousness, then, according to Wider, his most promising argument would be a logical one: the idea of consciousness unconscious of itself is a contradiction. The basis for this claim is that even pre-reflective consciousness is presence to being, and as such must posit itself as *not* being its object. But, she notes, that characterization of consciousness is at least *prima facie* incompatible with the inability of the truck driver to remember his driving while only prereflectively conscious, and with the complete inability of the blindsight patient to report his presence to the visible object.

The only alternative open to Sartre is to argue that the purported counterexamples are not cases of consciousness after all. This move would be unsatisfactory, however, because it would undermine Sartre's commitment to freedom. Actions determined by unconscious processing of information are not free. Wider concludes that the only way to save Sartre's main theses is to remember, as Sartre clearly does not, his claim that it is the body that is the subject of consciousness.

Wider shows plainly that Sartre himself has provided a way out of his difficulties:

It has been made abundantly clear in earlier chapters that for Sartre all consciousness, even at the pre-reflective level, must be present to itself. Now if consciousness just is the body's presence to the world, as Sartre argues, then the body must be present to itself in being present to the world. So there must be a kind of consciousness of the body, what I will call bodily self-consciousness, and this must form part of our awareness of the world. (p. 115)

If Sartre had remembered that the body is the subject of consciousness, he would have been able both to distinguish prereflective from reflective self-consciousness more adequately and to avoid the troublesome counterexamples. The former is so because it is through consciousness of the body that we are conscious of our agency, even pre-reflectively; the latter is so because we can be conscious of ourselves as bodies even without being conscious of ourselves *as conscious*. Why would Sartre not avail himself of this solution? Wider explains that Sartre clings to a remnant of Cartesian dualism: he insists that consciousness exists in part outside the causal order of the world; otherwise complete freedom would not be possible. But if the body is truly the subject of consciousness, then it cannot escape causal determinism.

For readers interested primarily in the issue of embodiment, the two final chapters will be the most rewarding part of the book. In Chapter 5, Wider marshals an impressive body of evidence from recent philosophy, psychology and the neurosciences in her argument for bodily self-consciousness. Wider's admirably clear and comprehensive discussion pulls together work of Johnson, Edelman, Evans, Cussins, Jeannerod, and others in a demonstration of the wide interdisciplinary agreement on this issue. All consciousness, she concludes, essentially involves bodily input; that means that all consciousness is in some sense a consciousness of the body—that is, of the self. If, as Sartre believed, all consciousness is also consciousness of an object that is not oneself, then this consciousness can be attained through awareness of the spatial properties of the body that separate it from other

objects. It is therefore not necessary to insist, as Sartre does, on the “nothingness” of consciousness, which leads to insuperable problems. It is, moreover, necessary to abandon at least one claim important to Sartre: that “all consciousness involves a pre-reflective bodily self-awareness that could be made reflective” (Wider, p. 145). There is not enough empirical evidence, Wider shows, that one’s ever-present bodily awareness can *always* be made the focus of attention, although usually it can to some degree. In other words, we can become explicitly aware of aspects of our bodies as part of the world in which our consciousness has its being, even though normally these aspects constitute a background for the objects of focused attention. Thus Sartre’s view that pre-reflective self-consciousness can always be made reflective is not supported by the more recent empirical and philosophical arguments.

Sartre’s concept of freedom is another casualty of the recognition of bodily self-consciousness. If bodily self-consciousness cannot always be made reflective, then it is not always conscious of itself. In that case, there can be unconscious determinants of our conscious behavior, a condition that violates Sartre’s central criterion for freedom. This, however, will not be disturbing to most contemporary adherents to the notion of bodily self-consciousness.

In Chapter 6 Wider sets out her own interpretation of the levels of consciousness that Sartre attempted to distinguish. The most fundamental form is bodily self-consciousness, present in sensorimotor activity that is focused upon objects in the world. This level corresponds to Sartre’s pre-reflective self-consciousness in that here the bodily data is processed preattentively. A shift in focus from worldly objects to the self-input constitutes a shift to reflective self-consciousness, which is not yet conceptual; this level corresponds to Sartre’s pure reflective self-consciousness. At the third level, one attempts to grasp oneself as an object in the world, as seen by others. One conceptualizes the pattern of action that one is, as if from an external point of view, while at the same time enacting that pattern on the basis of internally-generated input. Sartre called this level “impure reflection” because of its seemingly paradoxical blending of the subjective and the objective points of view.

Wider’s interpretation of the third level of self-consciousness is in striking accord with current work on the development of the concept of a person (Meltzoff & Gopnik, 1993; Barresi and Moore, 1996). These psychologists have proposed that there exists an innate framework for representing sensorimotor activity as performed both by the self and by others. Meltzoff and Gopnik call it a “supramodal body scheme;” Barresi and Moore an “Intentional Schema,” which they define as:

an intermodal perceptual and conceptual structure with the capacity to coordinate and integrate first and third person sources of information about object-directed activities into representations that link agents to objects through intentional relations. (Barresi & Moore, 1996, p. 109)

It is an exciting prospect that the very same characteristics of phenomenal experience that led Sartre to his ultimately untenable theory might turn out to be accounted for in naturalistic terms, both philosophically and empirically. If it does turn out that way, it will be in part because philosophers have been brave and honest enough to face squarely the difficult features of experience and to try to describe and explain them clearly, rather than to encapsulate them as unanalyzable mysteries. As

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Wider says, “Exploring the connections between science-based and phenomenology-based accounts of consciousness brings to light the way in which phenomenology anticipates and can help direct biological research on the nature of consciousness” (p. 149).

As I mentioned at the beginning of this review, my only reservation concerns the use of the term “consciousness.” Sartre’s definition of consciousness never becomes clear, and no other definition is offered. Part of Wider’s own argument is that because “consciousness,” as used both by Sartre and by contemporary writers, is not precisely defined, the relation between the two is not obvious; the relation between them that she does support requires careful argument. But this argument comes near the end of the book, and is confined to a specific aspect of Sartre’s account. Sartre’s definition of “consciousness” in general is not questioned by Wider. Instead, it is treated more as an unanalyzable unit in a theoretical system that Sartre has constructed. Only when this system is shown to be incoherent in its own terms are the definitions of those terms questioned. But by that time, the reader has had to accept Sartre’s concepts as given; not only that, but the concept of consciousness in contemporary work is analyzed only with respect to its compatibility with Sartre’s usage. We are shown clearly that contemporary discussions of consciousness entail that it cannot have the essential properties attributed to it by Sartre—for example, consciousness of itself as conscious—but not what essential properties it must have. This is not a serious problem for the purposes of this book, but it does show that much more work is necessary for a positive conclusion about consciousness *per se*. For example, in the discussion of Armstrong’s Long-Distance Truck Driver and the blindsight phenomenon, Wider notes that “while there is no way to establish with certainty that these are cases of conscious cognitive activity, I do think there is some evidence that justifies interpreting them as such” (p. 165). The evidence cited, however, consists of arguments and findings by various writers and researchers (Carlson, Velmans, Dretske, Lloyd, Gray and Holender, discussed on pp. 166-168) who disagree with each other on the very meaning of the term “consciousness.” Without a definition, no amount of empirical data can answer the question of what brain activity is conscious and what is not. I do not fault Wider for not providing such a definition; I believe it would be premature for any writer to attempt that at present. Instead, what should be done is what Wider has herself done, in effect: examine actual experiential phenomena that are generally agreed to be paradigm cases of consciousness, and look for their psychological roles and their physiological underpinnings. Only when that task is completed could a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for consciousness possibly achieve a consensus, and the conscious or nonconscious nature of various mental states be determined. At present there is no agreement on what kind of thing—brain state, psychological activity, phenomenal experience, reportable or not—the term refers to. In light of this absence of definition, it may be somewhat misleading to compare theories in which consciousness is treated as if it refers unambiguously to a recognized phenomenon.

What Wider’s book clearly shows is that bodily input appears to be a part of all experience, and that current scientific work is discovering the mechanisms of this phenomenon. She also shows that Sartre’s work contained important insights about the ubiquity of the experience of embodiment, and that these have been empirically

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confirmed. The fact that phenomenologists like Sartre provided such penetrating accounts before this work was undertaken, and the fact that their descriptions of embodied experience are still so illuminating, is a central component of this major new theoretical paradigm. Wider's perceptive book is an important contribution to our understanding of its claims, its history and its strength.

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