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I AM NOT THE BEARER OF EXPERIENCE¹

abstract

It seems to me that I am the bearer or owner of experience. However, this impression is misleading. If I am external to experience (that is, if what I am is not reducible to the way in which I appear in the present experience), then I can't know with absolute certainty that I exist. But I do. Hence I am not external to experience, and a fortiori I am not the external bearer of experience. If I am internal to experience, then what I am is reducible to the way in which I appear in the present experience. However, if I am a part of experience, I can't be its owner or bearer, for an owner or bearer of something can't be a part of what it bears or owns. Therefore, I am not the internal bearer of experience.

keywords

self, self-consciousness, certainty, The Transcendence of the Ego, sense of ownership

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1. Introduction It seems to me that I am the *bearer* or *owner* of the present experience. However, in this paper I shall argue that this impression is misleading.

A bearer of experience can be internal or external to experience. Something *s* is internal, relative to some experience *e*, iff *s* is identical to its phenomenal character in *e*, that is, to the way in which it appears in *e*, to what it's like to experience *s* in *e*. Something is external, relative to some experience *e*, iff *s* is not internal, relative to *e*. To illustrate, my dog is external to experience (at least *prima facie*, unless solipsism is true, say), whereas a particular shade of blue is internal to experience (at least *prima facie*, unless some form of naive realism¹ is true, say).

The distinction between being internal or external to some experience is exhaustive and provides us with a way of classifying views about the nature of the self. The argument of this paper is that both views that regard the self as internal and views that regard the self as external face problems in justifying the claim that the self is the bearer or owner of experience.

This way of carving up the logical space of views on the nature of the self is not standard, so it needs some comments before proceeding.

First, something can be internal to some experience *e* if it is a *part* of *e*, but also if it is *identical* with *e*. In other words, something can be internal to *e* by being identical with some *sub-part* of the total phenomenal character of *e*, but it can also be internal to *e* by being identical with the *total* phenomenal character of *e*. Also, to be clear, there is no distinction between *e* and, as we say, *its* phenomenal character: the present experience is its phenomenal character.

Second, there can be self-experiences, that is, the self can have some phenomenal character, even if the self is *not* internal to experience. That is, in some views the self is not reducible to some phenomenal character, and yet the self can (or even must) appear in experience. Some forms of animalism regard the self as something that can be experienced even if it is external to experience, that is, even if it is something that is not reducible to the way in which it appears in experience.

Third, it is important to stress that the *extension* of the predicates 'internal' and 'external', as defined above, is itself a controversial philosophical matter. There might be nothing that is

¹ For discussion of recent naive realist views see Genone 2016.

external to experience (if solipsism is true, say), and there might be nothing that is internal to experience (if some form of naive realism is true of *all* that appears in experience).

Fourth, if something is internal to experience, then *a fortiori* it can be experienced. This notion – being internal to experience – is meant to be neutral among different views about self-consciousness. Something internal to experience can be experienced *pre-reflectively*, *reflectively*, or in any other ways. For something to be internal to experience is for it to be identical with the way in which it *shows up*, that is, with the way it *appears*. In other words, however we think about self-consciousness, for something to be internal to experience is for it to be identical with *some* phenomenal character.

Since this way of carving up the logical space is not standard in contemporary debates, some recent theories of the self might not have made fully explicit whether the self is reducible to the way in which it appears to the present experience. That being said, recent views that seem to regard the self as internal to experience include, among others, (Strawson 2017), (Zahavi 2014), (Ramm 2017). To illustrate, in Strawson’s view, every single experience is a self, for what I am now just is the totality of the present phenomenal character. In Ramm’s view, the self is internal to experience because it is identical with a specific part of experience that is there in every experience, namely a phenomenal character that he describes, following (Harding, 1988/2001, p. 109), as a “visibly boundless Space”.

Recent views that regard the Self as external to experience include, among others (Dainton 2008), (Olson, 1997), (Snowdon, 2014), (Hudson, 2001) and (Parfit, 2012). To illustrate, according to Snowdon and Olson, I am a biological organism, so I am a body, and a body is not not reducible to some phenomenal character.

Let us now look at the arguments for the conclusion that the self is not the bearer of experience. In §2 I shall argue that I am not external bearer of experience; in §3 I shall briefly mention and put on a side the view that there can be an external bearer of experience that is not me; in §4 I shall argue that I am not the internal bearer of experience.

The argument for the conclusion that I am not an external bearer of experience runs as follows. First, I can know non-inferentially and infallibly that I exist. Second, I can know non-inferentially and infallibly that I exist only if I am not external to experience. Therefore, I am not external to experience. And if I am not external to experience, then, *a fortiori*, I am not the *external* bearer of experience. So, I am not the external bearer of experience. Let’s look at the motivation for each premise.

I can suppose that right now I am deceived by an (almost) all powerful evil demon who is creating the impression that some propositions are true even if in fact they are false. As I am so supposing, it seems that there are some truths of which I can be absolutely certain: that there is *this* (what I call “the present experience”), that I am thinking (*cogito*), that I exist (*sum*).

This is Descartes’ point (see his *Reply to the Second Set of Objections*, Descartes 1984, 100), at least on some interpretations of it (for a different reading see e.g. Peacocke 2012). Here we are concerned with the truth that *I exist*. The first premise of the argument says that it is possible to have knowledge of this truth that is both *non-inferential* – it is based on the present experience only – and *infallible* – its ground is sufficient to rule out the possibility that I don’t exist. For brevity’s sake, I shall sometimes speak of *certainty* in order to refer to knowledge that is both non-inferential and infallible.

This premise can be challenged (and we shall see in a moment some ways to do so). But I take it that to reject this premise comes with some significant cost. It does *seem*, to say the least, that even in the most radical skeptical scenario I can still know with certainty that I exist. Any theory that rejects this premise needs to *explain away* its apparent truth.

Let’s move to the second premise of the argument. The claim that I can know non-

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inferentially and infallibly that I exist is compatible with the claim that I am external to experience *only if* it is also possible to know non-inferentially and infallibly the existence of something that is external to experience. However, in the sort of radical skeptical scenario that we envisage in a Cartesian-like meditation, we are supposing that all beliefs about things that go beyond the present experience might be false. In particular, it seems to be impossible to know non-inferentially – that is, on the basis of the present experience *alone* – and infallibly the existence of some particular thing that is not identical with (or a sub part of) the present experience. This claim is, if anything is, virtually universally accepted in contemporary debate in epistemology. Thus, the supposition that I am external to experience is not compatible with the claim that I can know non-inferentially and with certainty that I exist.

To clarify, let's suppose, *for reductio*, that I am identical with some particular body (and of course, let us also suppose, for the argument's sake, that a body is external to experience). The present experience is not sufficient to know with certainty that some particular body exists. I can have the experience *as of my harms, as of my head, as of my feet, etc.*, but, given the supposition that I might be living in a radical skeptical scenario, the existence of the present experience does not guarantee that there actually exists a body there.

Consider, by analogy, this case. I am in a park and see what looks like a rabbit that is hidden behind the trees. In fact, I am only seeing its muzzle. For there to be a rabbit there must be something more than a muzzle. It might be that behind the trees there aren't any of the other parts that are regarded as necessary for something to be a rabbit. Hence, I can't know non-inferentially and infallibly that there is a rabbit there.

The same applies in the case of my own existence if I regard the self as external to experience. It seems that I exist (this impression is the same thing as seeing the muzzle), but I take it that for me to exist something more than the present experience must exist as well (the experience of the muzzle is not enough for concluding infallibly that the rabbit exists). Now, experience *alone* is not enough to conclude with certainty that what seems to exist out there really exists. Hence, if I am external to experience, then I can't know with certainty that I exist. But I do know non-inferentially and infallibly that I exist (or so the first premise says). Hence I am not external to experience.

Note that I am *not* claiming that this argument is by itself sufficient to establish the claim that the self and experience are *immaterial*, and anyway the aim of the argument is not to reach that conclusion². The argument only aims to establish the conclusion that the self exists and is *internal* to experience – either identical with it, or with some sub-part of it. It does not aim to say anything about the *nature* of experience (and hence, of the self).

Let's now consider some ways to reject the first premise of the argument – which is, I think, the most controversial one. One way to reject the first premise is to deny the existence of the self. If there is no self then I can't know with certainty that I exist. We might have the impression of existing, but this impression is misleading. However, if I don't exist, then *a fortiori* I can't be the bearer of my experience, and this is enough to establish the point of this paper. If there is no self then in some important sense *no one* bears the present experience (though see the hypothesis mentioned in the next paragraph).

One might reject the claim that it is possible to know the existence of the self *non-inferentially*. Yet, it is very hard to reject this premise – if one is not rejecting it on the ground that there is no such a thing as the self. The premise is in fact quite humble: it says that it must be *possible* to know of one's own existence non-inferentially. Descartes and many others

2 See Swinburn 2018 for a recent discussion of Descartes' indubitability argument for the immateriality of the self.

after him claimed that it was possible³. So, again, to reject the possibility of non-inferential knowledge of one's existence will require, to say the least, that one explains away a quite strong and widely shared seeming.

It is perhaps easier to reject the claim that it is possible to know one's own existence *infallibly*. But even if we were to reject the possibility of infallible knowledge of one's own existence, still it seems true that we can have *fallible* knowledge of our own existence, and that this knowledge can be gained *non-inferentially*. Consider, again, the skeptical scenario in which the existence of the external world is a sheer illusion. Still, while I am so supposing, I am having an experience, and the experience seems to be the experience of *me* having it. It is *me* who is doubting, and in order to know that it is *me* who is doubting I do not need to appeal to any further principle that functions as a bridge from the existence of the present experience to my existence. Perhaps I *might* appeal to some such principle, but I *need not* to.

Even if we suppose that this experience does not provide me with *infallible* grounds for concluding that I exist, still I think that most of us will concede that it provides us with *strong* grounds indeed to so believe. And, arguably, the *best explanation* why the present experience is enough to provide strong grounds for concluding *non-inferentially* that I exist seems to be that the self is *internal* to experience.

So, even if one has some independent grounds for believing that the self is external to experience, some story must be told to explain why, even if the Self is external to experience, it can be known *non-inferentially* and with *infallible* or anyway *strong evidence* that the self exists. I do not deny that there might be some *prima facie* plausible story to be told here. I just wish to highlight that there is a challenge to theories that regard the self as external to experience: the challenge is that it is hard to explain how it is possible for me to know non-inferentially and infallibly (or, at any rate, with strong evidence) that I exist if I am not something internal to experience.

Suppose that it is true that I am not the external bearer of experience. Does this rule out the possibility that there is an external bearer of experience that is not me? One might think, as Frege at some point speculates in his *Der Gedanke*, that the bearer of experience is some divine transpersonal entity. He writes:

It is so much of the essence of each of my ideas to be the content of my consciousness, that every idea of another person is, just as such, distinct from mine. But might it not be possible that my ideas, the entire content of my consciousness might be at the same time the content of a more embracing, perhaps divine, consciousness? Only if I were myself part of the divine consciousness. But then would they really be my ideas, would I be their bearer? This oversteps the limits of human understanding to such an extent that one must leave its possibility out of account. (Frege 1956, p. 300)

Another view might be that there is something that is not me but *somehow* belongs to me – perhaps a body – which is the owner or bearer of the present experience. In these views, I exist, there is a bearer of what I ordinarily regard as my experiences, but this bearer is not me. Although I do not wish to argue here that these views are false, it is important to stress that the very idea of a bearer of what appears as my experience that is not me is, to say the least,

3. Can there be an external bearer of experience that is not me?

³ A classic reference on this point is of course Husserl 1931/1960. For a recent defence of this claim – and, more generally, of the argument from certainty articulated in this section – see Duncan 2015 and the literature referred to therein.

prima facie puzzling. However, the puzzlingness of the view in part depends on the apparently intuitive thought that the self, if it exists, is the bearer of experience. But if this view turns out to be false – as I am arguing in this paper – then perhaps we can make room in our way of conceptualizing experience for the idea of something that is not *me* and yet is the bearer of what nonetheless *prima facie* appears as *my* experience. This could be a way to make room for the idea of a transpersonal bearer of experiences, or even, as Frege speculates in the passage quoted above, for some divine consciousness. To see why this can make any sense at all we need, however, to make some steps forward in the argument.

4. I am not the internal bearer of experience

I have excluded the possibility that I am the external bearer of experience on the ground that I can know with certainty that I exist and that this knowledge is possible only if I am internal to experience. The previous argument from certainty is a direct argument for believing that the self exists and is internal to experience. If we have some independent grounds to think there is a bearer of my experience, and that this bearer should be me, then with the argument from certainty we can conclude that the bearer of experience is internal. However the view that the bearer of experience is internal faces its own problems.

Consider, first, the view according to which the self is identical with the total phenomenal character of a given experience. In this view, it is hard to understand how the self can be said to *bear* or *own* experience. For, in this view, the self just *is* the present experience. What kind of *ownership* can experience have with itself – beside, precisely, *being identical with itself*?

One way to articulate the reason why self-identity can't be self-ownership is the following. It seems that something can bear or own something only if there is some *distinction* between that which is own and that which owns. Everyday ascriptions of ownership always seem to concern distinct objects: I own my bike, I bear my thoughts, I own my rights, I own my body etc. True, sometimes we can say things like “I own myself” or “own yourself”, but these are just ways of specifying relations between oneself and one's own thoughts, desires, choices, etc. so these cases do not count as counterexamples.

Consider now the view according to which the self is identical with a particular *part* of the total phenomenal character of the present experience. This view does not face the problem of identifying the self with that which it is supposed to own. However, this view faces other problems.

First of all, how can a part of some larger whole be also the bearer or owner of the whole? It seems that something can bear or own something else not only if there is a difference between the two, but also only if the former is not a part of the latter. Everyday ascriptions of ownership conform to this observation: I own my bike, but I am not part of the bike, I possess my body but I am not part of my body, etc. No star, however shining, can own the sky, just as no self, however *sui generis* its phenomenal character might be, can own the present experience.

Second, one can perhaps try to save the claim that the self owns its experiences by saying that the self, a sub-part of the total present experience, owns the other sub-part of the present experience. Thus, to illustrate, if a proper characterization of the present experience features sounds and a self, then one can perhaps say that the experience of sounds belongs to the self, that is, to me. But even if the self-part of experience is *sui generis* in its phenomenological status, still, from a metaphysical point of view, *it is on a par* with all the other things that are internal to experience. After all, the self is just a phenomenal character like any other thing that is reducible to a phenomenal character (e.g., colors, sounds, etc., depending on one's theory). So, again, in what relevant sense of ownership is a self, conceived of as a part of experience, can bear the other part of experience?

Similar insights are elaborated in Sartre's discussion of the Ego in his *The Transcendence*

of the Ego. Sartre argues, as I just did, that if the Ego is internal to consciousness, then it can't be said to be the owner of consciousness. What he calls "consciousness" – what I have called "experience" – has a priority over the Ego, for the Ego itself appears within consciousness. Here is one passage in which he makes the point:

As the me is an object, it is obvious that I will never be able to say: my consciousness, i.e. the consciousness of my me (except in a purely designating sense, in the sense in which one says for example 'The day of my baptism'). The Ego is not the proprietor of consciousness, it is its object. (Sartre 2004, p. 26).

And few lines later he says:

I can thus formulate my thesis: transcendental consciousness is an impersonal spontaneity. (Sartre 2004, p. 27)

Sartre's claim in this book is that the Ego is *transcendent*, it is an *object* within consciousness, and he relies on *this* claim in order to conclude that the Ego cannot be the owner of consciousness. However, there is no need to claim that the Ego or the self is an object in order to reach this conclusion. In fact, my argument against the view of the self as the internal bearer of experience does *not* rest on the premise that the self is experienced as an *object*. The argument applies to *any* view that regards the self as internal to experience, that is, as identical with the way in which it appears in experience. It doesn't matter *how* it appears – whether it appears as an object or as a subject, reflectively or pre-reflectively, whether it is identical with the whole present experience or just to some part of it. In other words, it doesn't matter what the correct account of its *phenomenal character* is. All it matters is that it *is* a phenomenal character. For, if the self appears in experience, then it is part of experience or identical with it, and as such cannot count as the bearer of experience, in any relevant sense of the term. This is why there is an important sense in which experience – what Sartre calls "transcendental consciousness" – is *impersonal*. If the self exists, and it is internal, then there is the appearance of a personality, but this appearance itself – and the totality of experience – is impersonal. There is the experience of a self, but precisely because there is this experience – and a self is nothing more than what is given in experience – the self is not its bearer.

I have presented arguments that challenge the claim that I am the bearer of experience. If these arguments are on the right track, then we should reconsider the way in which we pre-analytically think of the self and of its relationship with experience⁴. We think of the self as the *subject* of experience, and the subject is also often conceived of as the *owner* or *bearer* of experience (but see Albahari 2006 for discussion of this widespread assumption). But perhaps we should carefully distinguish the two notions – that of a *subject* of experience, and that of a *bearer* of experience – and say that I can be the subject of experience without being its bearer. To be the subject of experience is for there to be a *phenomenal character* in experience that justifies the use of that notion. To speak of me as the subject of experience is then to make a *phenomenological* observation, and perhaps a true one. But to speak of me as the *bearer* or *owner* of experience is to make a *metaphysical* claim about the relationship between me – the

5. Conclusions

⁴ From the claim that the self is not the bearer of experience one can also argue to the conclusion that the self does not possess free will. See Zanetti 2022 for a Sartrean-inspired argument to that effect.

subject of experience – and experience. I appear in experience as its subject – and this is the phenomenological point – but I am not its owner or bearer – and this is the metaphysical point – and I am not its bearer or owner *precisely because I appear in it*. Or, if one prefers to claim that being the bearer of experience is necessary for something to count as a self and as a subject of experience, then the upshot of the argument might be that although I do *appear as* the self, the subject of experience and as its bearer, this *appearance* is false. Either way, I must make room in my way of thinking of what I ordinarily call “my” experiences for the thought that I do not own them. If I am internal to experience, then, there is a sense in which I have no privileged place in experience. Experience owns me. *Being a phenomenal character*, I am on a par with colors, sounds, thoughts, and anything that appears in experience.

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