Comments on Sebastian's "Experiential Awareness: Do You Prefer *It* to *Me*?"

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In "Experiential Awareness: Do You Prefer *It* to *Me*?" Miguel Sebastian puts forward his self-involving theory of subjective character. Subjective character, we are told, is the "for-me-ness" element common to all conscious experiences and distinct from the qualitative character of conscious experiences. To illustrate, consider two current perceptual experiences that I am now having: My experience of seeing an illuminated computer screen, and my experience of hearing the hissing of the radiator behind me. Each of these experiences has its own distinct qualitative character, meaning that what it's like to have or undergo one is different from what it's like to have or undergo the other. Nevertheless, there is something that these two experiences have in common. Each is such that it is something it's like *for me* to have or undergo it. That, as far as I understand, is subjective character. It is, Sebastian writes, what makes phenomenally conscious states "phenomenally conscious state[s] at all" (p. 2).

So how should we understand this common "for-me-ness" that appears to imbue all conscious experiences, irrespective of their distinguishing qualitative character, and makes them phenomenally conscious states? That, I take is, is the problem of subject character and what Sebastian's self-involving theory aims to provide an answer to. Traditionally, answers to this sort of question have been externalist in nature. They hold, generally, that conscious experiences have this "for-me-ness" element by virtue of the experience's relation to things outside itself. Higher-order thought theories, for example, take subjective character to results from an experience's relation to a higher-order thought that represents the experience as being possessed by the subject, whereas first-order theories take subjective character to result from an experience's availability to a subject's first-order belief-forming mechanism.

Sebastian's self-involving theory, however, is internalist in nature. On the account, what makes a conscious states have subjective character, is not the state's relation to something outside itself, but the state's own intentional content. Sebastian provides a few passes at what this intentional content is. Early on he writes:

> To a first approximation ... this idea can be expressed in ordinary English either by saying that by having an experience as of a red apple I attribute to the apple the centered feature of having the disposition to cause an experience as of a red apple *in me* or by saying that by having an experience as of a red apple I attribute to *myself* (self-attribute) the property of being confronted with an object that has the disposition to cause experiences as of a red apple *in me*" (p. 10).

Later on, after explaining proto-qualitative states or PQs (basically, preconscious perceptual states whose contents are not *de se*) and the proto-self system (basically, a brain structure that has the function of indicating and regulating the homeostatis of the organism), Sebastian writes:

> A PQ [state] interacts with my proto-self, the system that monitors and controls the homeodynamics of my organism. The state represents that the organism is presented with an object that is disposed to cause PQ in normal conditions (*via particular visual path*$_{PQ}$ under *particular lighting conditions*$_{PQ}$). When the organism is in this state, it attributes to itself the property of being presented with an object that is disposed to cause PQ in normal conditions: it attributes to the object a centered feature. (p. 14)

Here is how I understand Sebastian's theory. Suppose that it's true that right now there is something that it's like for me to see the red apple in front of me. The question that I take Sebastian's theory to address is the question of what it is about me that makes it true that there is something that it's like for me to see the red apple. The initial part of Sebastian's explanation is that the apple before me causes in me a preconscious perceptual states (which he calls PQ) with something like the following non-*de se* content: there's a red apple. This perceptual state (PQ) is then fed into my proto-self system. The proto-self system then outputs a more sophisticated representational states — call it **S** — with roughly the content: the red apple there is disposed in normal conditions to cause in me a PQ state (or perhaps 'the PQ state that I am currently in'— Sebastian is unclear on this point) with the content red apple there. And it is in virtue of being in state **S** with its *de se* content that it is true that there is something it's like for me to see the red apple before me.

Assuming that my explanation of Sebastian's account is correct, a few rather immediate questions and comments come to mind.

1. First, there is the question of whether there is any independent empirical support for the existence of such *de se* states as **S** in human or animal brains. Clearly there is independent empirical grounds for believing that subjects undergo non-*de se* preconscious perceptual states (e.g. Marr's 2-D sketches), which Sebastian calls PQ states, as well as a "collection of neural patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of a physical structure of the organism in its many dimensions" (Damasio 2010, p. 154), which Sebastian calls the proto-self system. But neither PQ states nor states in the proto-self system, Sebastian remarks, are on their own "phenomenally conscious" (p. 12). Rather, it is the "interaction between both of them that gives rise to a phenomenally conscious mental state [e.g., such as state **S**]" (p. 12). Now there's no question that there are phenomenally conscious mental states in humans. What needs to be shown is that these state are at least correlated with states like **S** in our brains. And as far as I know, there isn't any independent empirical evidence for this correlation. (However, there are so many new studies coming out of cognitive neuroscience these days that it is conceivable that there is now such evidence for **S**-like states in human and/or animal brains). In section 4.2, Sebastian shows how the human brain *could* have such *de se* states as **S**. But that is not the same as showing that **S**-like states really exist in the human or animal brain and are correlated with the presence of phenomenal consciousness in subjects.

What is more, **S**-like states appear to be empirically more speculative than those states and mechanisms that the alternative externalist accounts of subjective character posit. Higher-order thought theories posit first-order and higher-order representational states, and there seems to be pretty good neurological evidence that humans have such states (see Gennaro 2012). And first-order theories posit first-order representational states and a first-order belief forming mechanism, and here too there appear to be very good empirical grounds for supposing that such

states and mechanism exist in the human brain (see Tye 1997). So on empirical grounds alone, these alternative theories of subjective character would appear to be preferable to Sebastian's self-involving theory.

Of course, it may well turn out that these externalist views, despite their resting on independently verified brain states and mechanisms, fail to explain subjective character, whereas the self-involving theory, on the assumption that there really are **S**-like states in the human brain, would explain subjective character. If this were so, then arguably that would be a reason to take the self-involving theory seriously. The question, then, becomes whether the self-involving account, on the assumption of the existence of **S**-like states in human and/or animal brains, explains subjective character. And on this question, the remaining points I believe are relevant to consider.

2. Sebastian takes **S**-like states to be a state of *attributing* a property to an object. In being in **S**, he says, I attribute to myself the ("centered") property of being before a red apple with the disposition in normal conditions to cause me to have a (the) visual state as of a red apple. But on one natural understanding of attribution, attributing a property to an object, much like acts of judging an object to fall under a category, are central cognitive events that are generally revisable in light of background information. For example, if I were convinced that there really were no apple before me, that I was just hallucinating a red apple there, I would not attribute to myself the property of being before a red apple with the disposition in normal conditions to cause me to have a (the) visual state as of a red apple. Nevertheless, there would still be something it's like for me to hallucinate a red apple, there would still be subjective character to my hallucination, despite the fact that I am no longer in state **S** anymore.

Now of course, there is *something* causing my hallucination — presumably, some state of my brain. Would that mean that, on Sebastian's account, I am in another *de se* state **S′** which is an act of attributing to myself the property of being in some brain state with the disposition in normal conditions to cause me to have a (the) visual hallucination as of a red apple? (I must confess, I don't think I would be making such an attribution, but perhaps I'm wrong about what I would attribute to myself in such cases.) However if that is the sort of attribution I must make in order for there to be something it's like for me to hallucinate, then what should we say in the case of young children who do not yet know that they have brain states? Presumably, they can't make such attributions. But suppose a 3-year-old child were to undergo a hallucinatory experience, say the experience of seeming to see afterimages on a wall after looking at the sun. Upon investigating the wall, the children might well conclude that there really are no colored images on the wall. However, this wouldn't mean that he would cease hallucinating such images. The child might well continue to hallucinate such images but no longer think that there are such images on the wall. If this were to happen, and it doesn't seem too far fetched, then surely there would still be something it's like for this child to continue hallucinating colored afterimages on the wall. But knowing nothing of his own brain, he would be unable to make the sort of *de se* judgement about his brain states that are apparently necessary on Sebastian's view for his hallucinatory experience to be phenomenally conscious. Would that mean that, on Sebastian's account, there would be nothing it's like for a child in such cases to hallucinate? That would be very counterintuitive.

3. To attribute a property *F* to an object *x*, one needs to have the concept *F*. Thus, in attributing to myself the property of being before an apple with the disposition in normal conditions to cause

me to have a (the) visual state as of a red apple, I would need to possess various concepts, such as *cause*, *disposition*, *visual state*. These are rather sophisticated concepts, and it is doubtful that many animals or very young infants possess them. There is some empirical evidence (though contested) that some animals (primarily apes and monkeys) and children around their second birthday have such concepts (e.g., see Baillargeon et al. 2010; Call & Tomasello 2008; Gopnick 2009). But there is no empirical evidence that I know of that human neonates or the vast number of other mammals and vertebrates that we have good reasons to think enjoy phenomenally conscious states either possess or employ such concepts.

4. On Sebastian's view, to undergo a state with subjective character involves making an attribution or judgement whose content can be identified with a "set of centered worlds, those centered worlds in which the object I am looking at is disposed to cause the experience in me (those centered worlds in which I am confronted with the object that causes the experience in normal circumstances)" (p. 10). A potential problem here is with cases of perceptual constancy. In such cases, we seem to make perceptual judgements whose contents are not identifiable with sets of centered worlds, and yet there is something it's like for us to undergo such perceptual judgments. For example, when staring at my kitchen table, the tabletop from where I am standing looks (in one sense of 'looks') like a squashed rhombus. At least, that is the sort of shape that I would draw if I were to sketch how the table looks to me from this angle. Psychologist call this the proximal mode of perception, since the percept changes with changes in the retinal image (proximal stimulation). However, as I stand before the table, the tabletop also looks (in another sense of 'looks') perfectly square. Psychologists call this the distal mode of perception — the percept remains constant regardless of the changes in my retinal image as I move round the table. Now there is certainly something it's like for me to perceive the tabletop as square in the distal mode. But my perception of the tabletop as square in the distal mode is my perceptual judgement that the tabletop has the property squareness. Squareness, however, is not a "centered feature," it is not a feature of an object whose instantiation depends upon my instantiation. Rather, my perceptual judgement is true in all those worlds where this table (or its counterpart) is square, whether I (or my counterpart) am in those worlds or not. Thus, this perceptual judgement does not have as its content a set of centered worlds, but nevertheless there is something it's like for me to undergo it. It would appear that Sebastian's theory is best suited for explaining the subjective character of proximal modes of perception, not distal modes of perception.

5. Perhaps I have made too much of the notion of attribution in Sebastian's theory. Perhaps nothing more is meant by it than that state **S** is a state in me that represents in some nonconceptual way that the red apple there is disposed to cause in me under normal conditions... etc. This may handle the concern above about animals and infants, since such a state would not require them to have sophisticated concepts of cause, mental states, etc. However, it would seem to restrict Sebastian's theory to explaining subjective character only in nonconceptual *de se* states. How would the account, for example, attempt to explain the "for-me-ness" of states of conscious occurrent thought? There is undoubtedly something it's like for me when conscious thoughts suddenly crosses my mind. But conscious occurrent thoughts are conceptual states.

6. Finally, there is the question of why Sebastian thinks that *de se* contents of the sort possessed by **S** are necessary for subjective character. His reason, it seems, is that subjective character, as noted above, is the "for-me-ness" of phenomenally conscious states, and that to get the "for-me-

ness" to be an essential element of all phenomenally consciousness state, we need to put the "me," as it were, into the content of these states. But if the "me" (the *de se*) element in the content of phenomenally conscious states is what makes such states have subjective character, then it would seem that all the other stuff that Sebastian packs into the content of states like **S** (e.g., the disposition under normal conditions to cause a certain type of perceptual state) would appear to be unnecessary. So, the question arises why aren't simpler *de se* states whose contents do not involve all this other causal stuff also have subjective character? If what is really essential for a state to have the "for-me-ness" feature is that its content is *de se*, then it would seem that any state with *de se* content should have subjective character. But that is surely too bold. For some of these *de se* states clearly do not have subjective character — at least, not simply in virtue of their *de se* content. For example, there is nothing it's like for me to continue believing that *I* am RL while I'm unconscious and sleeping, and there is nothing it's like for me to subliminally perceive that there is an object approaching to *my* left. So arguably something more than just having *de se* contents is needed for subjective character, but it is not so obvious that what more is needed is all the causal stuff that Sebastian packs into the contents of states like **S**.

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