Comments for Consciousness Online 4, on John Schwenkler's
Vision, Self-Location, and the Phenomenology of the 'Point of View'

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1. John Schwenkler argues that human visual experience represents the location of the subject of experience herself, even when no part of her body is within her field of view. What's more, he argues that visual experience represents this location *as* the location of the subject of experience herself – as she could put it, "My visual experience represents this as *my* location". Schwenkler suggests that this sort of first-person language is required in an adequate description of the representational contents of visual experience (17).

This is not just to say that you would naturally be inclined to judge, on the basis of your visual experience of objects around you, that you have a certain location. It's to say that reaching this judgement about yourself sometimes consists in simply taking the representational content of your visual experience at face value. Your visual experience itself represents a certain location as your own location. Alternatively (and for present purposes I don't think the difference matters), your visual experience itself represents you as having a certain location. Contrast the case in which you see footprints in the snow, and judge on this basis that someone has walked there. Plausibly, reaching this judgement consists in something more than simply taking the representational content of your visual experience at face value, since your visual experience does not itself represent that someone has walked in the snow.

Contrast also the view that visual experience of objects' locations can be adequately expressed in *monadic egocentric* terms, such as "It's to the left" (Campbell 2002: 184). Schwenkler argues that the expression "It's to the left of me" is sometimes more faithful to the representational content of visual experience. The latter expression, unlike the former, explicitly represents the speaker herself as one term of a two-place spatial relation. Schwenkler argues that visual experience represents the location of its subject in a similar way.

I'm inclined to accept Schwenkler's thesis, and to think he has hit on a good way of arguing for it. (This is almost certainly John's fault. His paper is persuasive, so imagine the effect of repeated discussions in grad' school!) Here I'd like to do two things. First I'll raise a challenge to Schwenkler's argument, and in particular to his use of Susanna Siegel's (2011) "method of phenomenal contrast". This is a challenge which Schwenkler considers, but I think it can be pressed harder than he allows. In fact I'll suggest that there is a more general issue here, about the limitations of the method of phenomenal contrast. Second I'll raise a question about how, exactly, Schwenkler's thesis is to be understood. If his argument is successful, how rich a form of self-awareness does it show visual experience to involve? Again I think there is a more general issue here, about different possible forms of self-awareness. To say these things clearly, I'll have to summarize some chunks of Schwenkler's argument. I hope that isn't too tedious.

2. The method of phenomenal contrast provides a test for claims about what visual experience represents. The method starts with the assumption that these claims should explain differences in the phenomenal character of experience. The method proceeds by showing that some claim about what visual experience represents explains a phenomenal difference between two experiences better than competing explanations. This justifies the view that visual experience indeed represents what is claimed.

Schwenkler's claim is that visual experience represents the location of the subject of experience as her own location. The two experiences he considers have been induced in the laboratory. Subjects sit inside a large cylindrical drum that's painted with vertical stripes, while the drum rotates around them. Stephen Palmer describes the two experiences as follows:

> You first perceive the drum as rotating and yourself as stationary. Within a few seconds, however, the experience changes to one of self-rotation within a stationary drum.
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> Palmer 1999: 505

Following Schwenkler, I'll call the first experience "*V*" and the second experience "*I*". We assume that some phenomenal difference between *V* and *I* prompts Palmer's description of the case, but at the outset we remain neutral as to whether his description is strictly speaking correct. That gets assessed using the method of phenomenal contrast.

On the face of it, the difference between *V* and *I* is not explicable just in terms of the idea that visual experience represents monadic egocentric locations. For example, consider the idea that you experience the location of some part of the drum now as on the right and then as on the left. Something could be now on the right, then on the left, either because it moved relative to you or because you moved relative to it. So nothing here should prompt a description like Palmer's. Nor is the difference between *V* and *I* explicable by adding that the drum appears stationary in *I* while it appears to move in *V*: presumably, Palmer's description is prompted partly by the fact that *I* involves a change which is absent in *V* (not just by the fact that *V* involves a change which is absent in *I*). But of course it doesn't immediately follow that Schwenkler's richer account of the content of spatial visual experience is correct. There might be other explanations of the difference between *V* and *I*.

If deciding among the alternatives were left to the vagaries of sheer introspection, the issue might be intractable. But that's where the method of phenomenal contrast comes in. As an introspective starting point, the method requires only the very limited claim that the two experiences in question differ with respect to their phenomenal character. The arguing is done by eliminating alternative explanations of this difference – by showing that they fail to explain the difference in some way (Siegel 2011: 92, 96).

For the purposes of these comments, we can start with the more loaded claim that Palmer's description of the case is a natural one (cf. Schwenkler: 14), in the sense that a subject of the two experiences might without undue prompting describe them as Palmer does. This does not require Schwenkler's preferred explanation, that *V* and *I* differ in how visual experience represents the subject's location. What makes the description natural might be some other difference between *V* and *I* which is reliably correlated with a difference between self-motion and other-motion.

Schwenkler suggests that if Palmer's description is *true*, then visual experience does represent the location of the subject as her own location (9). This is a

small point, but I'm not sure that's quite right. As described, the contrast between *V* and *I* lies in the fact that first you experience the drum as moving around you, and subsequently you experience yourself as moving around inside a stationary drum. This description implies that you do in some sense experience your own location relative to the drum. Let's assume that this is equivalent to saying that your experience represents your own location relative to the drum. Still, this does not entail the more specific claim that *visual* experience represents your own location relative to the drum. Some other aspect of your overall experience – even some other aspect of your overall *perceptual* experience – might represent this. I'll return to this possibility shortly.

Assuming that experiences have representational contents, the clear alternatives to Schwenkler's thesis are as follows. The difference between *V* and *I* might be a difference in what experience represents, but not a difference involving any representation of the subject or her location. Schwenkler rebuts some proposals of this form (16-19). I won't pursue this alternative in this part of my comments, although it will be relevant in Part 3. A second alternative is that the difference between *V* and *I* is "purely phenomenal", in the sense that this phenomenal difference is not explained by a difference in what the experiences represent (Schwenkler: 14). Third, the difference between *V* and *I* might lie in some non-visual experiential representation of the subject's own location.

When Schwenkler considers purely phenomenal differences, he spells out this alternative in terms of Peacocke's (1983) theory. Peacocke notes that two objects which are seen as having the same shape and size, but different distances from the observer, take up different spaces in her visual field: the nearer object takes up more space. Very roughly, Peacocke claims that these differences in the layout of the visual field determine purely phenomenal differences between visual experiences. As Schwenkler notes, this proposal does not help to explain the difference between *V* and *I.* In *V* and *I*, the space in the visual field taken up by each part of the drum changes in just the same way, a way which we can express in monadic egocentric terms: each part changes from being on the right to being on the left.

For this reason, I wonder whether Schwenkler spells out the "purely phenomenal" alternative in its most charitable form. Couldn't there be some other purely phenomenal respect in which *V* and *I* do differ? Even if it's hard to say what this difference is, we might reasonably expect purely phenomenal differences to be hard to describe. And if this purely phenomenal difference is reliably correlated with a difference between self-motion and other-motion, it might explain the naturalness of Palmer's description of *V* and *I.*

One thought here is that the purely phenomenal difference between *V* and *I* is not a visual difference. Palmer says that subjects become "dizzy" during *I* (Palmer: 505 and Schwenkler: 9). We might understand this in non-representational terms, as an extreme manifestation of a purely phenomenal difference between *V* and *I* which is not always so robust. Schwenkler does consider a proposal in this area, and I'll turn next to the alternative that the difference between *V* and *I* is not a difference in specifically visual experience. But I suspect that this alternative is best understood in terms of a representational difference between *V* and *I.* Many recent discussions take it that the burden of proof falls on anyone who cites purely phenomenal aspects of experience to demonstrate that the phenomena cannot be accounted for in representational terms. After all, it's controversial whether there are *any* purely

phenomenal aspects of experience. The alternative explanation that I'll turn to now avoids this burden.

The remaining alternative is that the difference between *V* and *I* lies in some non-visual experiential representation of the subject's own location. Schwenkler criticizes this alternative as follows:

> [I]n illusions of vection a person's experience has a particular sort of *cross-modal unity*: … there is no … discordance among the various ways that things appear to one to be. Rather, what makes an illusion of vection so compelling is precisely that, in the absence of any significant perceptual input suggesting a lack of change in one's position, *everything* in one's experience suggests that the surrounding world is stable while one's own body is in motion: if things did not appear this way to vision as well, then the illusion would be much less vivid than it is. So it does not seem reasonable to explain the difference between *V* and *I* just in terms of non-visual factors.
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> p.14

Let's accept that there is cross-modal unity among the various aspects of the overall experience *I*, in the sense that there is no discordance among these aspects of the experience: the overall experience represents you as rotating, and nothing in the experience suggests that you are *not* rotating. This does not establish that *everything* in your experience suggests that you are rotating. In particular, it's consistent with this form of unity that the specifically visual aspects of *I* represent things in more neutral, monadic egocentric terms, while some other aspect of *I* represents you as rotating. It's not clear to me why this form of unity should be insufficient for the vividness of the illusion in *I.* Think of a related illusion that you've probably experienced:

> When the train next to yours begins to pull slowly out of the station, you often vividly experience your own train [which is in fact stationary] as moving in the opposite direction instead.
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> Palmer 1999: 504

When you're subject to this illusion, it does *look* as if your own train is moving. But that doesn't establish that your visual experience represents your own train as moving. Compare: it looks as if someone has been walking in the snow.

So what non-visual aspects of experience might represent you as rotating, accounting for the vividness of the illusion in *I*? Cognitive experience – the experience of thinking or consciously believing that you're rotating – is not a good candidate. The standard move against this suggestion is to point out that the illusion persists even when you don't think or believe that you're moving. I find that's true with respect to the illusion in the train, and I imagine it's true with respect to Palmer's illusion too.[1]

This might seem to leave visual experience as the only option. After all, you don't experience yourself as rotating through any of the other four traditional outward senses. Nor do you experience this through bodily sensation as it's traditionally understood, *viz*. as the experience of some specific part or parts of your

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[1] In general, there are more subtle versions of the cognitive-experience alternative to visual experience of a phenomenon, but I won't go into them here. See Siegel (2011) for some strategies for eliminating them. As far as I can see, none of Siegel's strategies could eliminate the non-cognitive alternative that I propose below.

body. But in general, experiences of self-motion and self-location do not fall neatly among either cognitive experiences or experiences in the traditional five senses (plus bodily sensation). Think of the feeling of accelerating in a car while your eyes are closed. Or think of getting turned around in an unfamiliar town, and then being told the right way back to where you started. Even once you know the right way back, you can have a strong sense of direction to the contrary. In each case, we might reasonably describe the experience as perceptual rather than cognitive, even though it does not fall neatly among the five senses (plus bodily sensation).

For our purposes, the issue here is not whether these experiences qualify as perceptual, or even whether there is a principled way to decide this. The issue is that these experiences pose a challenge to the method of phenomenal contrast, when it's used to test claims about the contents of experience in the clearly perceptual modalities. It's clear, I think, that the aspect of *I* which represents self-location is neither cognitive nor a matter of experience in any of the traditional non-visual modalities. But that's not enough to show that this aspect of *I* is visual. This aspect of *I* might be non-visual, like the self-locating experiences above, and yet persist even when you know that it's illusory.

Now the experience in the car is probably supported by the vestibular system in the inner ear (Palmer 1999: 505), and the experience about town is probably supported by the cognitive map, a system in the hippocampus (O'Keefe and Nadel 1978). By contrast, *I* is probably explained by the fact that "the visual system tends to perceive the larger, surrounding object as stationary" (Palmer 1999: 504).[2] But does this feature of the processing support the view that visual experience, specifically, represents you as rotating in *I*? Even if the specifically visual system can be individuated in a way which doesn't beg this question, it's not obvious how this distinction in the processing bears on distinctions between kinds of experience. If the experience of self-motion in *I* has enough in common with the experiences in the car and about town, we might exploit a different, subjective criterion to group the experience of self-motion in *I* with those non-visual experiences, instead of classifying it as a form of visual experience. (This is not to assume, of course, that experiences in different perceptual modalities cannot represent the same things. Spatial experience in general seems to be a clear counterexample to that.)

I certainly haven't demonstrated that a non-visual aspect of experience explains the difference between *V* and *I*, but I think there's a serious question whether this alternative explanation can be ruled out using the method of phenomenal contrast.

I suspect that the case of self-location brings out a more general limitation of the method of phenomenal contrast, when it comes to testing claims about the representational content of perceptual experience in the traditional modalities. For some claims about what visual experience represents, for example, it may be clear that the relevant alternative is representation in cognitive experience. (Perhaps this is true of the cases discussed in Siegel 2011.) The standard move can then be used to test this alternative: does the experience persist even when you think it's illusory? But in other cases it may not be so clear that this is the only relevant alternative. Our sense of the world and our place in it is supported by a range of systems, some of which give rise to experiences that don't clearly fall either among the cognitive

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[2] Relatedly, Palmer cites Rock (1968) as showing that "visual information is sufficient" for the experience of self-motion.

experiences, or among the experiences in the traditional perceptual modalities.[3] I hope I've done enough in these brief comments to suggest that applying the method of phenomenal contrast may not be straightforward in these cases.

The challenge I've raised to Schwenkler's argument turns on some difficult issues about the individuation of the sensory modalities (for a recent review of them, see Macpherson 2011). These issues might be resolved in his favour. The challenge also turns on an ungenerous conception of specifically visual experience. We might adopt a more generous conception, according to which every broadly perceptual aspect of an experience of seeing counts as an aspect of visual experience. I see no reason why Schwenkler shouldn't adopt the more generous conception. I think his argument may well be successful if its conclusion is understood in those terms.

3. Suppose we accept Schwenkler's thesis. Visual experience represents the location of the subject of experience as her own location. Alternatively, visual experience represents the subject of experience herself as having a certain location. I'll close by asking two questions about how, exactly, we should understand this.

One question concerns the scope of the conclusion. To illustrate his thesis, Schwenkler discusses some cases which don't obviously involve self-motion: Vashti tied to a chair; someone looking at a door. But he's careful to argue only that "visual experience *can* include the location of the perceiver among its face value contents" (4, with my emphasis). Should we settle for this limited conclusion, or is there reason to think that visual experience is self-locating even in cases which don't obviously involve self-motion?

Finally, a question about the mode of presentation of the self that's made available by the face value contents of visual experience. Is this a distinctively perceptual mode of presentation of the self, in principle distinct from the mode of presentation under which we think of ourselves as having thoughts, plans, and even perceptual experiences. Perhaps we can imagine someone very confused about her visual experiences, so that she thinks they present her with a far-off place. "This", she says, referring to her own location in the first-personal way made available by the face value of her visual experience, "is not really where I am; it's not *my* location." Is this straightforward nonsense, or is it in principle conceivable that the "I" made available by the face value of your visual experience refers to one thing, while the "I" in terms of which you think of yourself as *having* experiences refers to another? How much of the self is available just in visual experience?

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[3] I'm very much indebted to a recent conversation with Nicholas Shea, both for the thought that our experiences may be liminal in this way, and for the thought that the cognitive map is one source of experiences of this kind.