Comments on Joel Smith's "Alienation and Self-Presentation"

In this fascinating paper, Joel Smith argues against what he calls *the self-presentation thesis*. This is the thesis that Hume denies when he says, "I can never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception." The idea is, roughly, that when we introspect, we are aware only of our conscious states; we are not aware of a separately existing self or subject of those states. Shoemaker famously argues that Hume's denial depends on what's often called "the perceptual model of introspection": the idea that introspection works just like perception, except that we are "looking within" at our own mental states instead of "outward" at the objects in our environment. Shoemaker thinks, and Smith agrees, that this is bad model of introspection. This is because, while perception provides you with identification information about the objects you perceive, you do not make first person judgments by identifying something in your experience as *yourself* and then ascribing some property to that thing. While I might identify the child I see running towards me as *my son* and then notice that he has skinned his knee, I do not, in introspection, identify someone as *myself* and then notice that this person is in pain.

Despite his agreement with Shoemaker on this point, Smith thinks there is nevertheless something right about Hume's denial of the self-presentation thesis. So he sets out to find a way of understanding the thesis so that it does not stand or fall with the perceptual model of introspection. His proposal, as I understand it, is to interpret the thesis as the claim that some experiences have first-personal representational content. Take the experience of pain. If the content of this experience includes, not just the pain, but, as Smith puts it, "that it is oneself that is in pain" (6), then this would be a case of self-presentation.

So are there any experiences that have first-personal content? Smith seems to think that the best candidates are visual experiences and cases of bodily awareness (proprioception, etc.). Visual experience is egocentric in the sense that it presents the objects one sees as spatially related to one's body. Smith cites Wright's claim that "the content of my experience when I see a pair of blue tits on a bird feeder, is: *there are blue tits on that bird feeder*, and not: *I am seeing blue tits on that bird feeder*" (6). However, I don't just see that there are birds on the bird feeder, I see the birds and the feeder as *being a certain distance relative to my body*. But, unless we are hardcore Cartesians, this is just to say that the experience presents them as spatially related *to me*. The point is even more obvious in the case of bodily awareness. Through proprioception, I might have an experience that *my* legs are crossed. Or I might have an experience that *my* arm is moving. The question, then, is whether these kinds of experiences really have first-personal content. Must I use first person pronouns in order to express the content of these experiences? Are these cases in which I am aware of my body *qua* self?

Evans (in *Varieties of Reference*) and, more recently, Cassam (in *Self and World*) argue that in such cases we are aware of our embodied selves *qua* subject, and that Hume was therefore wrong to deny the self-presentation thesis. Their arguments depend, in part, on the claim that the judgments we make on the basis of such experiences are immune to error through misidentification: it doesn't make sense to ask, "Someone's legs are crossed, but is it *my* legs that are crossed?" Or: "Someone is standing in front of a bird feeder, but is it me who is standing in front of a bird feeder?" The thought (first

articulated by Wittgenstein) is that immunity to error through misidentification is a sign of awareness of oneself *qua subject*.

Smith, by contrast, argues that these experiences do not in fact have first personal content. Cases of alienation, according to Smith, suggest that the self-presentation thesis is false, at least for these kinds of experiences. One example he cites is the "alien hand syndrome." People who suffer from this report feeling as if their hands belonged to another person; they do not experience their hands as their own, despite experiencing bodily sensations in their hands "from the inside." For a person with this syndrome, it *does* make sense to ask, "Someone has a band-aid on her hand, but is it *me*?" Or, "Someone's hand is sunburned, but is it *mine*?" Smith thinks that this shows that bodily experience is not self-presenting – it does not have first-person content. For if it did have first-person content, then it would not be possible to make such mistakes.

I won't go into the details here, but Smith appeals to other types of alienation (anarchic hand, anonymous memory, thought insertion) to suggest that other kinds of experiences (action awareness, memory, intellectual experience) are also not self-presentational. He concludes:

> What alienation cases show, when taken at face value, is that it can make sense, from the subject's perspective, to wonder whether or not their subject is me. That is, it is possible for such experiences to ground other-misidentifications. This would not be possible were those forms of experience first-personal, i.e., self-presentational. For self-presentation would seem to entail a sense of ownership lacking in these cases. I conclude that alienation cases show that, in the case of bodily-awareness, action-awareness, memory and intellectual experience, self-presentation is false.

While Smith thinks these experiences allow for "other-misidentifications" (mistaking oneself for someone else), they are still immune to errors of *self*-misidentification (mistaking someone else for oneself). He ends the paper with an account of immunity to error through misidentification that explains why this is so. According to Smith, some forms of experience are "self-tracking" in the sense that they necessarily only deliver information about one's own states. If a form of experience, *F*, is self-tracking, then if I know, via *F*, that *a* is *t*, then I am *a*. The important point here is that I might not realize that I am *a*. This is what is happening in the alienation cases: the subject knows, say through bodily awareness, that a hand is sunburned. If bodily awareness is self-tracking, then it implies that the hand belongs to *her*. But the fact that the hand belongs to her doesn't entail that she *recognizes* that it is hers, and indeed this is just what she fails to recognize.

Here are some questions. First of all, I would be interested to know whether Smith also wants to deny that visual experiences are self-presentational. Remember that Smith cites visual experience as the kind of experience that seems, at least on the face of it, to have first person content. Are there cases of alienation that suggest otherwise? If not, then perhaps it's too quick to accept the Humean denial.

Another concern that I have has to do with what these cases of alienation tell us about normal experiences. Let us grant for the moment people suffering from alien hand syndrome have bodily experiences that lack first personal content. Why should we say

the same for people who do not suffer from this condition? Smith's argument seems to presuppose that the bodily experiences of alien hand sufferers *have the same content* as the bodily experiences of normal people. But why not say instead that the content is different? Why not say that, unlike normal bodily experience, the experiences of those who have alien hand syndrome lack first personal content, and this is why they report feeling as though their hands belonged to someone else?

I am also interested in how Smith would like us to understand the content of the experiences that lack first personal content. If the content of my bodily experience is not, say, that *my* legs are crossed, what exactly is it? Is the content instead just *that someone's legs are crossed*? If so, how does this avoid collapsing into the picture Smith wants to reject: that my first person judgments involve an identification-component? Smith *doesn't* want to say that my knowledge that my legs are crossed is the result of my knowledge that someone's legs are crossed combined with the identification of those legs as mine. His discussion towards the end of the paper suggests that he thinks we can have identification-freedom without self-presentation, and that the self-tracking account is supposed to explain how this is possible. But it would be helpful to hear more details here. For example, when (in the normal case) I judge that *my* legs are crossed, is this because I'm making some kind of inference from the fact that the form of experience through which I receive information about these crossed legs is self-tracking? Is that what is going on when I am "articulating the unarticulated self"?

One final question: as Smith defines self-tracking, a form of experience (F) is self-tracking just in case it *necessarily* delivers only information about oneself. In that case, is self-tracking limited to forms of experience that ground knowledge about one's *mental states*? Or can something like bodily awareness be self-tracking too? Given the context, I was expecting bodily awareness, action awareness, etc. to be self-tracking, but hypothetical cases of quasi-perception, quasi-proprioception, etc. make me hesitant to say that these forms of awareness *necessarily* deliver only information about the subject of the experience. (I have a similar worry about quasi-memory, though Smith uses episodic memory as an example of a self-tracking form of experience.) Perhaps what we should say here is that there are two types of self-tracking forms of experience, and that the distinction between these two types aligns with the distinction between logical and *de facto* immunity to error through misidentification. The awareness we have of our own mental states is self-tracking in the sense that it *necessarily* only provides information about the subject of the awareness. This is why some psychological self-ascriptions are thought to be immune to error through misidentification. Bodily awareness, by contrast, is self-tracking only in the sense that we *take for granted* that it only provides information about the subject. This is why some bodily self-ascriptions have *de facto* immunity to error through misidentification.

Thanks to Joel Smith for the interesting paper and to John Schwenkler for the opportunity to comment on it! I'm looking forward to the discussion!

Cheryl Chen
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