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Attention and the Self

*An Appreciation of C.O. Evans’
‘The Subject of Consciousness’*

The Subject of Consciousness is a rich, strikingly original and ambitious work. It makes an important and timely contribution to current debates on a number of issues which over the last few years have been taking centre stage in the philosophy of mind: for example, self-consciousness, selective attention and the nature of bodily awareness.

What makes this achievement somewhat unusual, and all the more remarkable, is that *The Subject of Consciousness* was published thirty years ago (Evans, 1970). The reviews it received at the time ranged from the hostile to the derisive — one of the more positive comments was Dennett’s remark that the book was ‘courageously unfashionable’ (Dennett, 1971, p. 180). Perhaps partly as a result of this initial reception, the book has been under-utilized, to say the least. In retrospect, I think it is clear that none of the reviewers was really able to recognize the significance of the issues discussed in the book, let alone do justice to the theory it develops. What they certainly failed to appreciate is the imaginative and sure-footed way in which Evans draws on, and engages with, psychological work on attention (especially T. Ribot and William James). Moreover, the book is open-minded in another respect. As the preface states, while its author is someone ‘working, broadly speaking, within the analytical tradition’ (p. 11), there are many points of contact with phenomenology. The reviews suggest that in the early seventies, this may have been enough to convince many that the book could be, at best, courageously unfashionable. So one of the purposes of this appreciation is to put the record straight, as it were, and give due recognition to what I think is a brilliant work. More importantly, however, I want to suggest that there is much that can be gained from taking Evans’ views seriously.

The central thesis of the book might be called the Experiential Self-Awareness claim:

(ES) Each of us has the experience of being a self.

The flaw in traditional approaches to personal identity, according to Evans, is that they either ignore, or falsify, the experience we have of being a self. Experiential self-awareness is ignored if the nature of personal identity is explained purely in

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third-personal terms, by reflecting on the way persons are identified, and re-identified, from a third-person perspective. (This is labelled the *persons-approach*, exemplified, according to Evans, by the work of Strawson and Shoemaker.) There are two traditional views of personal identity which purport to take the first person point of view seriously: the Pure Ego Theory, on which the self is a mental substance, and the Serial Theory, on which it is nothing but a bundle of perceptions. But neither of them, Evans argues, is faithful to the character of experiential self-awareness. While the Pure Ego Theory articulates our sense that ‘an experience is always presented to a subject as an experience to him, as something over against himself’ (p. 26), it makes it impossible to think of the self as something which is present in experience. On the other hand, the Serial Theory rightly rejects the idea of a self lying behind our experience, but it is incompatible with the unity we take our experiences to possess in virtue of being experiences to a single subject. The project of the book, then, is to explain personal identity as it presents itself from the first-person perspective (i.e. to develop what Evans labels the *self-approach*), in a way that respects both the unity and the experiential presence of the self. The theory Evans presents is an attempt to spell out a single, powerful and, I think, very suggestive idea: that the key to an explanation of self-consciousness lies in the fact that consciousness is structured by attention.

Before considering this idea in more detail, a word about Evans’ project. How should we understand the difference between the persons-approach and the self-approach? (a) One reading might be that the two approaches are concerned with two kinds of perspectives on persons, and their identity over time. The self-approach, on this reading, would be an investigation of the way in which one can know ‘from the inside’ that it is one and the same person, viz. one self, who, say, had a headache yesterday and is still having a headache today. (b) Alternatively, one might take the two approaches to be concerned with our awareness of the identity of two different kinds of continuants — persons and selves.

The problem with these readings is that they take for granted an assumption which Evans explicitly rejects: the assumption that in being experientially aware of being a self, one is aware of an object. Evans argues that this assumption not only gets the phenomenology of experiential self-awareness wrong, it also misconstrues the nature of what he calls native knowledge of the self. More precisely, he endorses the following claims: (i) In being experientially aware of being a self, the self is not an object of experience. (ii) Knowledge expressive of experiential self-awareness involves neither referential nor sortal identification of one self (it does not involve knowing an answer to the questions ‘Which is it?’ or ‘What is it?’). So it would be a mistake to describe Evans’ project as that of giving an account of a ‘first-personal’ way of gaining knowledge of the identity over time of a particular object. A better initial characterization would be to say that Evans aims to give an account of the unity of consciousness. The crucial point, though, is that Evans takes this project to be inseparable from that of explaining the identity of the self. The underlying claim here might be put like this: (iii) For two experiences to belong to the same consciousness is for them to be experiences to the same self. This would suggest that his distinction between the persons-approach and the self-approach is to be read as follows: (c) The persons-approach deals with the conception of the identity conditions of persons that is implicit in our practice of referential identification of persons; the self-approach aims to give an account of the unity of consciousness, both at a time and over time.

One reaction to this way of setting up the issues would be to call into question the usefulness of talking about the self outside the context of self-reference. As J. McDowell put it: ‘It is useful to reflect on the etymology of “the self”. The self is presumably whatever it is about which a thinker thinks when he thinks about *himself*.’¹ Now Evans would of course reject this view, given his commitment to (ii). According to Evans, statements articulating experiential self-awareness express non-theoretical, non-propositional knowledge, and involve no reference to a particular person. Evans’ reasoning here, very briefly, is that in making reference to particulars we are answerable to the requirement of knowing which object we have in mind, and he argues that statements about one’s mental life made in soliloquy have no possible use for such knowledge — the question of which object one has in mind ‘does not arise’ (see p. 216). But the force of this point may be disputed. Some would deny that reference to particulars is always subject to a ‘knowing which’ requirement.² Others would insist that the requirement is met in the case of self-identification, even if normally, as Evans rightly emphasizes, the question of which object one has in mind does not arise (see Gareth Evans, 1982, ch. 7; Cassam, 1997). But whatever the correct view on this question is, one might wonder how central (ii) is to Evans’ overall theory. It seems to me that many of Evans’ claims about attention and experiential self-awareness stand quite independently of his commitment to (ii). In a way, the question of how to explain our use of the first person pronoun is a side-issue. What matters, as far as Evans’ overall project is concerned, is something weaker than (ii), namely what might be called the Independence claim:

(I) Experiential self-awareness does not require the ability to represent one self as an object.

The structure of the book is as follows. The first, introductory chapter outlines Evans’ project. There follow three chapters on consciousness and attention: chapter two discusses the definability of consciousness, chapter three defends the claim that consciousness is structured by attention, and chapter four develops the idea that attention, in its various forms, implies the presence of an unattended background, which Evans terms unprojected consciousness. He then proceeds to argue that the experiential self is to be identified with unprojected consciousness (chapter five), and that the self, so understood, is temporally and spatially extended (chapters six and seven).

Central to Evans’ defence of (ES) is a distinction between three varieties of attention. Examples of *unordered attention* include what Evans calls pure sensuous consciousness (where we are ‘simply enjoying our present sensations’, p. 80) and the state of reverie, as well as stimulus-driven attention to perceived objects, as in the orienting reflex. The characteristic feature of unordered attention is the passivity of the subject. Evans distinguishes two active kinds of attention. *Interrogative attention* is ‘the attention of a probing intelligence in search of the answer to some question’ (p. 100), while *executive attention* is the attention we give to a skilled activity. These active forms of attention share the feature that ‘success or failure conditions for attention can be specified’ (p. 100); for example, success may consist in finding the answer to a particular question, or completing a certain task.

[1] In Gareth Evans (1982), p. 259, n. 2

[2] Campbell (1994) is sometimes interpreted in this way (see, for example, Cassam, 1997, p. 135).

Now what makes attention important, from Evans' point of view, is that it introduces a polarity into consciousness: it 'polarizes consciousness into an object of attention and an unprojected consciousness' (i.e. an unattended background) (p. 106). The nature of this polarity varies across the different forms of attention: each of the three forms is characterized by a distinctive way in which object of attention and unprojected consciousness relate to one another. In unorderd attention, the relation is one of 'mere juxtaposition' (p. 108). In contrast, in the case of the active forms of attention, there is a functional relation between the two: which element of consciousness occupies attention is partly determined by the content of unprojected consciousness. As Evans illustrates (in what I find one of the most engaging sections of the book) by glossing an example of Sartre's, interrogative attention requires the attender to have some idea of what she is looking for. Such a guiding idea, as Evans calls it, determines what it attended to, but can not itself at the same time be an object of attention. It operates by setting up a 'relevancy system', which determines not only which objects will be noticed but also how objects of attention are individuated: for example, 'the proof-reader might treat syllables as the objects of attention, while the ordinary reader might treat meaningful groups of words as objects of attention. Unless we know the purpose behind the attention, we can not say what should be taken as the object of attention' (p. 117). As for executive attention, Evans highlights the role of kinaesthetic sensations in controlling skilled bodily actions. For such control to be effective, kinaesthetic sensations must be present, yet not as an object of attention. This is brought out by the case of the 'golfer who gives his attention to his kinaesthetic sensations during his swing, instead of giving his attention to his shot: his doing so throws him off his whole performance' (p. 126).

What does it mean to say that the experiential self is to be identified with unprojected consciousness? And how does Evans motivate this claim? It is important to be clear, first of all, on the kind of self-awareness which unprojected consciousness is held to constitute. In one sense, a subject might be said to be aware of her self when she considers and answers a question about herself, or some fact about herself is brought to her notice. This is not what Evans has in mind at all. Experiential self-awareness in his sense is 'an aspect of all awareness', and 'accompanies all our experience' (p. 169), insofar as all experiences are experiences 'to' a self. Although the term does not figure in Evans' discussion, it may be helpful to think of this mode of self-awareness in terms of the notion of a point of view. The claim would be that the self has some kind of phenomenological presence in any experience belonging to her perspective *qua* subject of that point of view. The notion of unprojected consciousness might then be expected to contribute to an explanation of what such presence amounts to.

Evans first introduces the identification of unprojected consciousness and experiential self by noting certain similarities between unprojected consciousness and features traditionally associated with the self, notably its 'elusiveness', in Ryle's sense. While this is certainly suggestive, it will not convince a sceptic. But I think Evans has a stronger case to make. Suppose we accept (iii) — the claim that for two experiences to belong to the same consciousness is for them to be experiences to the same self. And suppose, next, that Evans offers convincing reasons for thinking that unprojected consciousness plays a crucial part in explaining the unity of consciousness. It would then be plausible to conclude that the notion of unprojected consciousness is at least

closely related to the idea of the phenomenological presence of the subject of consciousness.

We find the outlines of such an argument in chapter six, entitled ‘Yesterday’s Self’. The chapter aims to establish a connection between the unity of consciousness over (a brief period of) time — despite the chapter’s title, it is short term memory, rather than episodic memory, Evans is concerned with — and the continuousness of certain activities which, put in Evans’ terms, sustain awareness. What he has in mind here is simply activities such as looking, listening, or sniffing — activities which enable us to exercise a degree of control over what we perceive. Now Evans’ suggestion is that states of perceptual awareness may exhibit a unity in virtue of the unity exhibited by the activities sustaining them. To use his example, someone’s concurrent visual and auditory awareness of an orchestra may be unified in virtue of the fact that the subject’s listening and looking are informed by the same ‘guiding idea’, aiming, say, to form a judgement on the quality of the performance. (There is a question here, which I will not pause to consider, about whether a more contemplative mode of listening would still count as interrogative attention.) Or again, one and the same continuous activity may be involved in sustaining successive states of awareness, giving rise to a unity of consciousness over time.

Evans’ point might be put by saying that two perceptual experiences belong to a unified consciousness in virtue of being (partial) answers to a single question. The activities sustaining them must cooperate, not compete; they must be guided by a single ‘relevance system’.³ Of course, much more would need to be said to fill in this picture. One question, for example, is how to account for the unity of consciousness in episodic memory: put in Evans’ terms, what makes the remembered experience and the experience of remembering experiences ‘to the same self’ (given their association with potentially quite disparate relevance systems)? But I think the general idea of connecting the unity of consciousness with the unity of the purpose underpinning awareness-sustaining activities is very suggestive. It promises to offer an attractive alternative both to neo-empiricist, ‘impersonal’ accounts of the unity of consciousness, such as Parfit’s (see Parfit, 1984), and to neo-Kantian accounts which explain the unity of consciousness in terms of a subject’s capacity for self-ascribing experiences. What is attractive about Evans’ proposal, in my view, is that it links the unity of consciousness with self-consciousness, but in a sense that is more primitive than the ability to self-ascribe experiences.

I have focussed on Evans’ treatment of interrogative attention, but of course this is only one element in his overall account. In Evans’ view, unordered attention and executive attention, too, involve a distinctive experiential presence of the self, and hence a distinctive way in which consciousness is unified. I will not examine Evans’ proposals regarding these other forms of attention. Instead, I want to end with a question which can be raised about each of the three ways of spelling out the idea of experiential self-awareness, namely the question of what makes it an awareness of the *self*.

One way to answer this question would be by reference to the subject’s ability to represent her self as an object — to think of her self in the first-person way. Thus, with regard to interrogative attention, it might be said that having a ‘guiding idea’

[3] See p. 215. It would be interesting to compare this suggestion with C. Korsgaard’s at least superficially similar account of the unity of consciousness, in her 1996.

constitutes a form of self-awareness in virtue of its having a first-personal content: the specification of the success conditions involves reference to one self. A different approach would be to invoke the notion of a merely implicit reference to the subject. Thus one might appeal to the egocentric spatial content of perceptual experience — to the fact that perceptual experience presents us with things as being located, for example, in front, or to the right, i.e. from a particular spatial point of view, the occupant of which is not explicitly represented in the experience. Since it is not explicitly represented, the subject of a point of view is not a possible focus of attention. But its merely implicit presence might be said to be at least part of the unity of consciousness (see Eilan, 1995). However, these ways of spelling out the involvement of the self would not be acceptable to Evans, and it is worth spelling out why. The first proposal would of course be incompatible with the Independence Claim mentioned earlier. The point is that representing one self as an object involves having a conception of what kind of object, and of which individual, one is, and Evans takes experiential self-awareness to be independent of such conceptual sophistication. The second proposal envisages no explicit self-reference, but it violates another constraint Evans accepts. Evans clearly endorses a kind of internalism about consciousness: the assumption is that it is possible to delineate the content of someone's conscious experience without essentially bringing into play any objects in the person's environment, nor even the person's own body. It is Evans' acceptance of these constraints (the Independence Claim and internalism about consciousness) that leads him to spell out the connection between unprojected consciousness and self-awareness in the particular way he does, viz. by identifying the self with the unattended elements of consciousness. This is a radical conclusion which would deserve a more detailed discussion. But to the extent that a case can be made for rejecting either, or both, of the two constraints, it might be possible to avoid the radical conclusion, without giving up Evans' basic insight about unprojected consciousness and self-awareness. Indeed, Evans himself provides materials for one way of fleshing out this option. At the very end of the book, he comes close to reconciling the self-approach and the persons-approach. Taking a cue from S. Hampshire, Evans acknowledges that the experience of acting on physical objects amounts to an experience of the self as a physical object. As he puts it, the experience of acting on objects gives us 'overpowering reasons' (p. 234) for identifying the body-for-consciousness, i.e. the set of kinesthetic sensations forming the attentional background of skilled agency, with a physical object.

By concentrating on the main conclusions Evans reaches, I have left out a large amount of detailed work Evans does *en route*. There are illuminating and engaging discussions of such issues as the nature of our concept of consciousness, the individuation of perceptual experiences, the possibility of an attention-free consciousness, or the nature of mental imagery. Another attractive feature of the book is the way in which Evans from time to time brings in relevant parts of the (unjustly neglected) historical background (for example, Sir William Hamilton, Samuel Alexander and T. Ribot).⁴

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