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## 'I' = AWARENESS

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Introspection reveals that the core of subjectivity — the 'I' — is identical to awareness. This 'I' should be differentiated from the various aspects of the physical person and its mental contents which form the 'self.' Most discussions of consciousness confuse the 'I' and the 'self.' In fact, our experience is fundamentally dualistic — not the dualism of mind and matter — but that of the 'I' and that which is observed. The identity of awareness and the 'I' means that we know awareness by being it, thus solving the problem of the infinite regress of observers. It follows that whatever our ontology of awareness may be, it must also be the same for 'I'.

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### 'I'

We seem to have numerous 'I's. There is the I of 'I want,' the I of 'I wrote a letter,' the I of 'I am a psychiatrist' or 'I am thinking.' But there is another I that is basic, that underlies desires, activities and physical characteristics. This 'I' is the subjective sense of our existence. It is different from self-image, the body, passions, fears, social category — these are aspects of our person that we usually refer to when we speak of the self, but they do not refer to the core of our conscious being, they are not the origin of our sense of personal existence.

*Experiment 1:* Stop for a moment and look inside. Try and sense the very origin of your most basic, most personal 'I', your core subjective experience. What is that root of the 'I' feeling? Try to find it.

When you introspect you will find that no matter what the contents of your mind, the most basic 'I' is something different. Every time you try to observe the 'I' it takes a jump back with you, remaining out of sight. At first you may say, 'When I look inside as you suggest, all I find is content of one sort or the other.' I reply, 'Who is looking? Is it not you? If that "I" is a content can you describe it? Can you observe it?' The core 'I' of subjectivity is different from any content because it turns out to be that which witnesses. not that which is observed. The 'I' can be experienced, but it cannot be 'seen.' 'I' is the observer, the experiencer, prior to all conscious content.

In contemporary psychology and philosophy, the 'I' usually is not differentiated from the physical person and its mental contents. The self is seen as a construct and the crucial duality is overlooked. As Susan Blackmore puts it,

Our sense of self came about through the body image we must construct in order to control behaviour, the vantage point given by our senses and our knowledge of our own abilities — that is the abilities of the body-brain-mind. Then along came language. Language turns the self into a thing and gives it attributes and powers. (Blackmore, 1994)

Dennett comments similarly that what he calls the 'Center of Narrative Gravity'

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gives us a spurious sense of a unitary self:

A self, according to my theory, is not any old mathematical point, but an abstraction defined by the myriads of attributions and interpretations (including self-attributions and self-interpretations) that have composed the biography of the living body whose Center of Narrative Gravity it is (Dennett, 1991).

However, when we use introspection to search for the origin of our subjectivity, we find that the search for 'I' leaves the customary aspects of personhood behind and takes us closer and closer to awareness, *per se*. If this process of introspective observation is carried to its conclusion, even the background sense of core subjective self disappears into awareness. Thus, if we proceed phenomenologically, we find that the 'I' is identical to awareness: 'I' = awareness.

### Awareness

Awareness is something apart from, and different from, all that of which we are aware: thoughts, emotions, images, sensations, desires and memory. Awareness is the ground in which the mind's contents manifest themselves; they appear in it and disappear once again.

I use the word 'awareness' to mean this ground of all experience. Any attempt to describe it ends in a description of what we are aware of. On this basis some argue that awareness *per se* doesn't exist. But careful introspection reveals that the objects of awareness — sensations, thoughts, memories, images and emotions — are constantly changing and superseding each other. In contrast, awareness continues independent of any specific mental contents.

*Experiment 2:* Look straight ahead. Now shut your eyes. The rich visual world has disappeared to be replaced by an amorphous field of blackness, perhaps with red and yellow tinges. But awareness hasn't changed. You will notice that awareness continues as your thoughts come and go, as memories arise and replace each other, as desires emerge and fantasies develop, change and vanish. Now try and observe awareness. You cannot. Awareness cannot be made an object of observation because it is the very means whereby you can observe.

Awareness may vary in intensity as our total state changes, but it is usually a constant. Awareness cannot itself be observed, it is not an object, not a thing. Indeed, it is featureless, lacking form, texture, colour, spatial dimensions. These characteristics indicate that awareness is of a different nature than the contents of the mind; it goes beyond sensation, emotions, ideation, memory. Awareness is at a different level, it is prior to contents, more fundamental. Awareness has no intrinsic content, no form, no surface characteristics — it is unlike everything else we experience, unlike objects, sensations, emotions, thoughts, or memories.

*Experience is dualistic, not the dualism of mind and matter but the dualism of awareness and the contents of awareness.*

Thus, experience is dualistic, not the dualism of mind and matter but the dualism of awareness and the contents of awareness. To put it another way, experience consists of the observer and the observed. Our sensations, our images, our thoughts — the mental activity by which we engage and define the physical world — are all part of the observed. In contrast, the observer — the 'I' — is prior to everything else; without it there is no experience of existence. If

awareness did not exist in its own right there would be no 'I'. There would be 'me,' my personhood, my social and emotional identity — but no 'I', no transparent centre of being.

### Confusion of Awareness and Contents

In the very centre of the finite world is the 'I'. It doesn't belong in that world, it is radically different. In saying this, I am not suggesting a solipsistic ontology. The physical world exists for someone else even when I am sleeping. But any ontology that relegates awareness to a secondary or even an emergent status ignores the basic duality of experience. Currently, there are many voices denying the dualistic ontology of awareness and contents. For example, Searle attacks mind-body dualism, regarding consciousness (awareness) as an emergent property of material reality. He likens it to liquidity, a property that emerges from the behaviour of water molecules composed of hydrogen and oxygen — atoms that do not themselves exhibit liquidity. 'Consciousness is not a "stuff"; it is a *feature* or *property* of the brain in the sense, for example, that liquidity is a feature of water (Searle, 1992).<sup>\*</sup> But liquidity, understandable as it may be from considerations of molecular attraction, is part of the observed world, similar to it from that ontological perspective. To state that the subjective 'emerges' from the objective is quite a different proposition, about which the physical sciences have nothing to say.

<sup>\*</sup> Liquidity may not be the best example of emergence; both hydrogen and oxygen exhibit liquidity at very low temperatures.

Colin McGinn also insists that there is no duality of mind and matter — all can ultimately be explained in physical terms — but he asserts that the critical process by which a transition occurs from one to the other will never be understood because of our limited intellectual capacity (McGinn, 1991). McGinn believes that the observer/observed duality is apparent rather than real; there is a physical transition from the observed to the observer. But the ontological gap between a thought and a neuron is less than that between the observer and the observed; there is nothing to be compared to the 'I', while thoughts and neurons are linked by their being objects of observation, contents of 'I', sharing some characteristics such as time and locality.<sup>†</sup> Granted that a blow on my head may banish 'I', its relationship to the observed is fundamentally different from anything else we can consider. The best that can be said for the materialist interpretation is that the brain is a necessary condition for 'I'.

<sup>†</sup> For an interesting discussion of this point, see William James' essay, 'Does consciousness exist?' (James, 1922)

### Confusion about 'I'

One can read numerous psychology texts and not find any that treat awareness as a phenomenon in its own right, something distinct from the contents of consciousness. Nor do their authors recognize the identity of 'I' and awareness. To the contrary, the phenomenon of awareness is usually confused with one type of content or another. William James made this mistake in his classic, *Principles of Psychology*. When he introspects on the core 'self of all other selves' he ends up equating the core self with 'a feeling of bodily activities...' — concluding that our experience of the 'I', the subjective self, is really our experience of the body:

When the topic does come up, consciousness in the sense of pure awareness is invariably confused with one type of content or the other.

\* Robert Forman is an exception. See Forman (1993).

† For discussions of this point and its relationship to philosophical problems see Forman (1990b) and Shear (1990).

...the body, and the central adjustments which accompany the act of thinking in the head. These are the real nucleus of our personal identity, and it is their actual existence, realized as a solid, present fact, which makes us say 'as sure as I exist' (James, 1950).

To the contrary, I would say that I am sure I exist because my core 'I' is awareness itself, my ground of being. It is that awareness that is the 'self of all other selves.' Bodily feelings are *observed*: 'I' is the observer, not the observed.

Beginning with behavioural psychology and continuing through our preoccupation with artificial intelligence, parallel distributed processing, and neural networks, the topic of awareness *per se* has received relatively little attention. When the topic does come up, consciousness in the sense of pure awareness is invariably confused with one type of content or the other.

A few contemporary psychiatrists such as Gordon Globus (1980) have been more ready to recognize the special character of the self of awareness, the observing self, but almost all end up mixing awareness with contents. For example, Heinz Kohut developed his Self Psychology based on considering the self to be a superordinate concept, not just a function of the ego. Yet he does not notice that awareness is the primary source of self experience and concludes: 'The self then, quite analogous to the representations of objects, is a content of the mental apparatus. (Kohut, 1971)

We see the same problem arising in philosophy. After Husserl, nearly all modern Western philosophical approaches to the nature of mind and its relation to the body fail to recognize that introspection reveals 'I' to be identical to awareness.\* Furthermore, most philosophers do not recognize awareness as existing in its own right, different from contents. Owen Flanagan, a philosopher who has written extensively on consciousness, sides with James and speaks of 'the illusion of the mind's "I" — (Flanagan, 1992). C. O. Evans starts out recognizing the importance of the distinction between the observer and the observed, 'the subjective self,' but then retreats to the position that awareness is 'unprojected consciousness,' the amorphous experience of background content (Evans, 1970). However, the background is composed of elements to which we can shift attention. It is what Freud called the preconscious. 'I'/awareness has no elements, no features. It is not a matter of a searchlight illuminating one element while the rest is dark — it has to do with the nature of light itself.

In contrast, certain Eastern philosophies based on introspective meditation emphasize the distinction between awareness and contents.† Thus, Hindu Samkhya philosophy differentiates *puruṣa*, the witness self, from everything else, from all the experience constituting the world, whether they be thoughts, images, sensations, emotions or dreams. A classic expression of this view is given by Pantanjali:

Of the one who has the pure discernment between *sattva* (the most subtle aspect of the world of emergence) and *puruṣa* (the nonemergent pure seer) there is sovereignty over all and knowledge of all. (Chapple, 1990.)

Awareness is considered to exist independent of contents and this 'pure

consciousness. is accessible — potentially — to everyone. A more contemporary statement of this position is given by Sri Krishna Menon, a twentieth century Yogi:

He who says that consciousness is never experienced without its object speaks from a superficial level. If he is asked the question 'Are you a conscious being?', he will spontaneously give the answer 'Yes.' This answer springs from the deepest level. Here he doesn't even silently refer to anything as the object of that consciousness (Menon, 1952).

In the classical Buddhist literature we find:

When all lesser things and ideas are transcended and forgotten, and there remains only a perfect state of imagelessness where Tathagata and Tathata are merged into perfect Oneness... (Goddard, 1966)\*

Western mystics also speak of experiencing consciousness without objects. Meister Eckhart declares:

There is the silent 'middle,' for no creature ever entered there and no image, nor has the soul there either activity or understanding, therefore she is not aware there of any image, whether of herself or of any other creature. (Forman, 1990)

Similarly, Saint John of the Cross:

That inward wisdom is so simple, so general and so spiritual that it has not entered into the understanding enwrapped or clad in any form or image subject to sense. (1953)

The failure of Western psychology to discriminate awareness from contents, and the resulting confusion of 'I' with mental contents, may be due to a cultural limitation: the lack of experience of most Western scientists with Eastern meditation disciplines.†

Eastern mystical traditions use meditation practice to experience the difference between mental activities and the self that observes. For example, the celebrated Yogi, Ramana Maharshi, prescribed the exercise of 'Who am I?' to demonstrate that the self that observes is not an object; it does not belong to the domains of thinking, feeling, or action (Osborne, 1954). 'If I lost my arm, I would still exist. Therefore, I am not my arm. If I could not hear, I would still exist. Therefore, I am not my hearing.' And so on, discarding all other aspects of the person until finally, 'I am not this thought,' which could lead to a radically different experience of the 'I'. Similarly, in Buddhist *vipassana* meditation the meditator is instructed to simply note whatever arises, letting it come and go. This heightens the distinction between the flow of thoughts and feelings and that which observes.\*\*

Attempts to integrate Eastern and Western psychologies can fall prey to the same confusion of 'I' and contents, even by those who have practised Eastern meditation disciplines. Consider the following passage from *The Embodied Mind*, a text based on experience with mindfulness meditation and correlating Western psychological science with Buddhist psychology.

...in our search for a self ... we found all the various forms in which we can be aware — awareness of seeing and hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, even awareness of our own thought processes. So the only thing we didn't find was a

\* For a detailed account see Daniel Goleman, 'The Buddha on meditation and states of consciousness,' in Shapiro and Walsh (1984).

† The key activity of modern Western psychotherapy is to enhance the experience of the observing self, discriminating it from the contents of the mind. Indeed, Freud's basic instructions on free association bear a striking resemblance to the instructions for *vipassana* meditation (Deikman, 1982).

\*\* In Buddhism, the meditation experience may be given different interpretations. Walpole Rahula is emphatic in saying that Buddha denied that consciousness exists apart from matter and therefore rejected the idea of a permanent or enduring Self or Atman (Rahula, 1959). In contrast, D. T. Suzuki identifies the Self with absolute subjectivity (Suzuki et al., 1960). However, both Vedantic and Buddhist commentators agree on the illusory nature of the self-as-thing.

*When they say, 'we just simply could discern there no self, no "I",' to what does 'we' refer?*

*Why are there such glaring polarities? Why is consciousness characterized as a phenomenon too familiar to require further explanation, as well as one that remains typically recalcitrant to systematic investigation, by investigators who work largely within the same paradigm?*

*We know the internal observer not by observing it but by being it. Knowing by being that which is known is ontologically different from perceptual knowledge.*

truly existing self or ego. But notice that we did find experience. Indeed, we entered the very eye of the storm of experience, we just simply could discern there no self, no 'I' (Varela et al., 1991).

But when they say, '... we just simply could discern there no self, no "I", to what does 'we' refer? Who is looking? Who is discerning? Is it not the 'I' of the authors? A classic story adapted from the Vedantic tradition is relevant here:

A group of travellers forded a river. Afterwards, to make sure everyone had crossed safely, the leader counted the group but omitted himself from the count. Each member did the same and they arrived at the conclusion that one of them was missing. The group then spent many unhappy hours searching the river until, finally, a passerby suggested that each person count their own self, as well. The travellers were overjoyed to find that no one was missing and all proceeded on their way. Like the travellers, Western psychology often neglects to notice the one that counts. Until it does, its progress will be delayed.

Similarly, discussions of consciousness (awareness) as 'point of view' (Nagel, 1986) or 'perspective' do not go far enough in exploring what the 'first person perspective' really is. In my own case, it is not myself as Arthur Deikman, psychiatrist, six feet tall, brown hair. That particular person has specific opinions, beliefs, and skills all of which are part of his nominal identity, but all of which are observed by his 'I', which stands apart from them. If awareness is a fundamental in the universe — as proposed most recently by Herbert (1994), Goswami (1993) and Chalmers (1995) — then it is 'I' that is fundamental, as well, with all its ontological implications. Arthur Deikman is localized and mortal. But what about his 'I', that light illuminating his world, that essence of his existence? Those studying consciousness, who can see the necessity for according consciousness a different ontological status than the physical, tend not to extend their conclusions to 'I'. Yet, it is the identity 'I' = awareness that makes the study of consciousness so difficult. Güven Güzeldere (1995) asks:

Why are there such glaring polarities? Why is consciousness characterized as a phenomenon too familiar to require further explanation, as well as one that remains typically recalcitrant to systematic investigation, by investigators who work largely within the same paradigm? (Güzeldere, 1995)

The difficulty to which Güzeldere refers is epitomized by the problem: Who observes the observer? Every time we step back to observe who or what is there doing the observing, we find that the 'I' has jumped back with us. This is the infinite regress of the observer, noted by Gilbert Ryle, often presented as an argument against the observing self being real, an existent. But identifying 'I' with awareness solves the problem of the infinite regress: we know the internal observer not by observing it but by *being it*. At the core, we are awareness and therefore do not need to imagine, observe, or perceive it. Knowing by being that which is known is ontologically different from perceptual knowledge. That is why someone might introspect and not *see* awareness or the 'I', concluding — like the travellers — that it doesn't exist. But thought experiments and introspective meditation techniques are able to extract the one who is looking from what is seen, restoring the missing centre.

Once we grant the identity of 'I' and awareness we are compelled to extend to the core subjective self whatever ontological propositions seem appropriate for

awareness. If awareness is non-local, so is the essential self. If awareness transcends material reality so does the 'I'. If awareness is declared to be non-existent then that same conclusion must apply to the 'I'. No matter what one's ontological bias, recognition that 'I' = awareness has profound implications for our theoretical and personal perspective.

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