

Subject and Object

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It may turn out, as some scientists suggest, that we are forever precluded from investigating consciousness by a sort of indeterminacy principle that stipulates that the very act of looking will make it twitch and blur out of sight.

Lewis Thomas

Consciousness is a word worn smooth by a million tongues. Depending on the figure of speech chosen it is a state of being, a substance, a process, a place, an epiphenomenon, an emergent aspect of matter, or the only true reality.

George Miller

Let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around.

George Orwell

The reframing of consciousness advocated here begins with the abandonment of the distinction between mind and matter as fundamental, and its replacement by the distinction between subject and object, or awareness and appearance. This is a radical step. The Copernican revolution in astronomy is sometimes said to have had a profound impact on how we as humans conceive ourselves and our place in the world. That may be, but the impact seems to have had little if any effect on the lives of ordinary Renaissance Europeans, most of whom hardly noticed. It had no discernable effect on their morals. A reorientation of the meaning of “self”, though, would have a greater impact on how we conceive our place in the world, especially because of its ethical implications. It remains to be seen, of course, whether many people today would take any notice of what might seem so abstract a topic.

In present conventional thinking the two distinctions — mind/matter and subject/object — are often conflated. It is supposed that in each case a similar distinction is made, though in different words. The subject is usually associated with mind, and objects with matter. But the distinctions divide our experience along different lines and cut one another at an angle. So thoughts, for instance, are on the mental side of the mind/matter distinction, but on the object side of the subject/object distinction.

Dividing the Universe

A concept of self is commonly thought to have meaning only by virtue of a distinction between self and not-self. A conceptual boundary is drawn, and (in a common assumption anyhow) the universe of everything that exists is divided into two parts. One part is myself, and the other is everything which is not myself.

The referent of the pronoun “I”, when I use it, is myself. But the reference of “self” varies with context, and not merely because we each may seem to draw a different boundary when we say “I”. Radically different concepts and theories of self, some of them mutually incompatible, are found in psychology, sociology, philosophy, religion, artificial intelligence, and ordinary talk and opinion. These different concepts and theories draw the self/not-self boundary in radically various places. Different theorists tell me that I am, for example:

- a body consisting of matter;
- a mind;
- a body/mind;
- a living organism;
- an organism’s behavior and/or functions;
- a person, as defined in part by social roles and relationships;
- an artifact of my culture;
- an information processing program or programs;
- an immortal soul;
- a kind of narrative, or a center of narrative gravity.

Though they divide the universe differently, and draw different boundaries, these concepts or theories have in common that they do all divide the universe somehow and do all draw a boundary somewhere. Each listed theory conceptualizes the self as something compound or having parts and a structure, something changeable, something with a boundary which in some cases may expand or contract.

Questions about the nature of the self are of course intimately linked to questions about the nature of consciousness. The assumption that the self is something in the universe, or one part of the universe distinguishable from the rest, is linked to the assumption that consciousness is a state or property of some part of the universe, whether of an organism, a person, a brain, part of a brain, or perhaps even a machine.

To clarify the relationship between concepts of self and consciousness, it may help to prune away some distracting connotations. The various items on the list above, in their various contexts, suggest all sorts of subsidiary issues which have only tenuous relevance to inquiries about the fundamental nature of consciousness. But there is a core meaning, having to do with consciousness, which permits any of the listed items, varied as they may be, to be called “self”. Without consciousness, none would be “self”. So let us focus the meaning of “self” here in what is literally a radical manner — getting at the root. Consider the terms of such familiar distinctions as between, for instance, observer and observed, seer and seen, hearer and heard, or thinker and thought, where the role of consciousness is explicit. Such pairs generalize to the distinction between

subject and object. The concept of “subject” is at the core of any concept of “self”. Its meaning is given in the distinction between subject and object.

The two related assumptions just mentioned — (1) that I am a discrete part of the universe with some sort of boundary (physical, functional or conceptual) marking the division between me and the rest, and (2) that consciousness is a property of some part of the universe — are so deeply ingrained that to question them may seem ridiculous. But in my opinion it is exactly here that progress toward clear thinking about consciousness is blocked. A genuine breakthrough requires abandonment of these two assumptions. To that end let us examine the neglected distinction between subject and object, not in terms of some presupposed theory or other, but as we actually make it prior to any theory or opinion whatsoever. The distinction we actually make is not a matter of dividing the universe.

Words

Let’s note in passing that clarification of this distinction allows us to clean up some of the semantic mess we find with the related terms “consciousness”, “mind”, “awareness” and “experience”. Less frequent in the literature of consciousness studies are “sentience” and “spirit”; these seem somewhat more divergent in meaning, but nevertheless their meanings too share a core element. Some writers distinguish different meanings for these various words, and often differ, and argue, about their favorite allocations of meaning, while other writers seem to use some of these terms more or less interchangeably. There are texts in which “consciousness” could replace “mind”, or vice versa, without changing the reader’s sense of the meaning the author appeared to be trying to convey. All too often semantic issues obscure substantive issues and are mistaken for them, as illustrated by debates about whether or not there is such a thing as “unconscious experience”. The equivocations once provoked Shaun Gallagher to suggest on JCS-online, reasonably but to no avail, that “for the sake of argument, let’s stipulate that the terms ‘consciousness’, ‘awareness’, and ‘experience’ are equivalent.”

It may seem that we need to define our terms, and many attempts have been made, but disagreements about definition persist. Some argue that it is pointless to try to define such a suitcase word as ‘consciousness’. Desperate philosophers have sometimes resorted to issuing their own coinage.

If usage is to determine meaning, then the meanings of these terms are not identical. Each has a different idiomatic niche in ordinary talk. I might say, “He lost consciousness,” without fear of being misunderstood. If I were to say, “He lost awareness”, instead, I might be understood as saying the same thing, though it might not sound as idiomatic. If I were to say, “He lost experience”, you might well be puzzled about what I meant. And if I were to say, “He lost his mind,” I would be understood as meaning something else altogether.

To the degree that use determines meaning, an analysis of usage can of course be illuminating. But Orwell advised: let the meaning choose the word, and not the other

way around. I have specific meanings in mind, regardless of the words that might be chosen to express them. The challenge here is not to analyze meanings that usage provides, but to say what I mean, choosing among available words, all of which come each with its own different cloud of distracting connotations, associations, prejudices, and customary uses.

So as a practical matter, for the sake of argument, let's accept Gallagher's stipulation and focus it by saying that "consciousness" and "awareness" are equivalent where their meanings overlap (while acknowledging that in common usage areas may not overlap). Of course, we each may size and locate the areas of reference somewhat differently. But if we can agree that there is indeed some overlap, albeit so crudely conceptualized, then we're in a position to notice that the overlap is the really interesting and problematic part.

So "consciousness" and "awareness" are used here as synonyms, though, in a given context, connotation or idiom may incline me to one or the other. They are not to be distinguished as referring to different levels, to different functions, to different evolutionary stages, or by reference to different sets of objects. I have no intention of ruling out distinctions. You may want to distinguish between "conscious awareness" and "unconscious awareness", in some sense. But without prejudice as to the legitimacy of the distinction, I decline to use these words to make it. Better, it seems to me, to prune away potentially misleading variants among a crucial word's meanings. Analysis of the variants may be interesting, to be sure, but it is secondary to the goal of indicating a crucial distinction ostensibly, whichever words we choose to express it.

An ostensive definition is not in terms of words, but by indication or display. You can define "horse" with words, or ostensively simply by pointing out some horses. "Consciousness" and "awareness", as used here, are defined by pointing out a crucial distinction, in the hope that you will recognize and agree on what's being pointed out.

That distinction has variously been described as between self and other, or I and not-I, or awareness and appearance, or subject and object. Consciousness is already implied in each of these expressions of the distinction. Many discussions of consciousness, though, are crippled by a crucial ambiguity, when the terms of the distinction are conflated. When talking about consciousness, are we talking about awareness of what appears? Or are we talking about appearances themselves? Sensations, thoughts, and feelings appear to us. They come and go, appear and disappear. The ambiguity is this: sometimes it's thought that such appearances are just what consciousness (or mind) is made of, and to study them is to study consciousness. On the other hand, consciousness may be understood as awareness of such appearances, rather than as composed of them.

The Crucial Distinction

The reframing I have in mind rests on this question: Can we agree on a crucial distinction between awareness and appearance, even prior to deciding how best to conceptualize that distinction, or what words to use when discussing it? Even if we continue

to disagree about how to conceptualize the terms of the distinction, can we agree at least that we are groping to conceptualize a real distinction, rather than an artifact created by accidents of usage?

If not, we can't proceed, and the proposed reframing is moot. But if so, our foot may be in the door. To realize the distinction, even prior to agreement on theory, facilitates understanding how an investigation of the point of view might be made — an investigation which is empirical in the broad sense that we look to find out what is actually the case. What we observe when we look may or may not turn out to be what we expect. After looking we may decide how to conceptualize and discuss what we have observed. Before the observation, though, some conceptual conclusions are premature.

Here I use the term “object” broadly. Let it refer to anything anyone might be aware of or pay attention to, anything that might appear. It refers, then, not only to “physical” objects, but also to such “mental” entities or processes as pains, sensations, memories, images, dreams and daydreams, emotions, thoughts, concepts, desires and so on. That is, any of these may appear; they may be objects of attention or pass in and out of awareness.

Let the term “subject” refer to I-who-am-aware, whatever opinion we may hold of what that “I” may be. To be a subject, in this sense, is to be aware or conscious. I, subject, can be aware of some object; I can focus awareness in attention paid to that object; and I can distinguish myself from the object I attend to. This is a convenient way of talking, but risks being misunderstood. To say that the subject is aware is not to say that awareness is a property of something and that this something is the subject. It may be less risky, given the confusion of our concepts, to say that the subject is awareness.

Now, you may believe that you are one of the items mentioned on the list above. At some earlier time in your life you may have believed you were a different item, and have since changed your mind. Or you may identify with some other item not on the list, or you may have no opinion or are suspending judgment.

But the crucial point to emphasize is this: the distinction between subject and object (and our capacity to make it) is prior to self-identification with any such item whatsoever. It is prior to any particular opinion or theory about what the subject may be. By “prior” I mean that before I can even begin to wonder *what* I am (much less decide that I am such-and-such) I must already have realized *that* I am.

At any time that you are aware of some object, or attend to some object, you won't have any trouble distinguishing it from yourself as subject, regardless of what you may believe about the nature of the self or of consciousness and their relation to the world. That is, you're likely to know, immediately, without having to stop and think it over, or having to collect any evidence, which is you and which is the object appearing to you. You can distinguish yourself as subject from any object whatsoever — “physical” or “mental” — any time you direct your attention to that object and realize that it is not that object which is aware and paying attention, but you. The real nature of the object and the real nature of the subject may be baffling mysteries, but these mysteries are no

barrier whatever to knowing which is obviously which.

Of course, if we define “subject” as some part of the universe, with a boundary, we may well be confused about which is which. Confusion about the boundaries of the self can even become a psychiatric problem. Such a definition commits the fallacy of objectification, which occurs any time we attempt to define “subject” in terms of objects. There will be deep philosophical questions no matter how we ground our definition, but confusion and anomalies are guaranteed if we do not ground it in the distinction we actually make.

For example, you may hold the opinion that you, the subject, are a biological organism. But this is merely a theoretical conception. The distinction itself is prior to this or any other theory. If you think you are a biological organism, you classify your hand as part of you, since it is part of the organism. But if you look at your hand, or become aware of it in any way, you experience it as an object of attention and in this respect can distinguish it from yourself as subject. It appears to you, not you to it. You don’t make this distinction as an implication of whatever theory you might have about the self. Indeed, the conspicuous lack of fit between the distinction you actually make and any theory based on objectification is the cause of all the familiar anomalies and puzzles of consciousness studies.

Whenever you realize that something is appearing to you, you are capable of making this distinction regardless of what that something may be. Sights and sounds appear; smells and tastes appear; touches, feelings, pains, thoughts, and impulses all appear and disappear, and when they do, you are capable of noticing their appearance and realizing that you are aware of them. With practice, then, you can rigorously and systematically discriminate subject and object, or awareness and appearance.

This is how to follow the ancient Delphic advice: know thyself. It’s the same advice suggested by Buddhists and Vedantists for centuries. Sometimes it’s taken to mean merely: know the quirks of your own individual character or personality. That’s important of course, but it’s just the beginning of the study. If you undertake the study (which, for those who undertake it seriously, can be a long study), sooner or later a curious observation is likely to occur to you. If you discriminate awareness and appearance often enough, long enough, and on sufficiently various occasions, it is likely to dawn on you that the subject is not an object. The subject is not any particular object or any combination of objects.

The chief barrier to drawing this conclusion is conceptual. Prevailing conceptions of mind or consciousness, based on the unquestioned assumption of objectification, impose constraints on what we allow ourselves to realize. And once we have adopted a conception we become attached to it.

Consciousness Is Not a Property

Some of the most difficult and contentious issues in the philosophy of mind arise from the assumption that consciousness or subjectivity is to be understood as a state or property of something, or defined in terms of some state or property. People, animals,

sometimes even machines, are said to be conscious or unconscious; they exhibit or do not exhibit this property; they are in this or that state. Thoughts, feelings, and impulses are said to be conscious or unconscious, as though consciousness were a property those things can have. Nowadays the most popular properties are physical, behavioral, or functional: a state of the brain, a kind of behavior, or a function in the processing of information.

Our ordinary talk expresses and reinforces these assumptions. If someone is said to be conscious or unconscious, we have a practical sense of what is meant; it's a useful, even crucial, distinction to make. As in physics, it's only in odd or extreme cases that the crudity of our everyday concepts is exposed. When the doctor asks the nurse if the patient is conscious, nobody is confused about the question. But when the theorist of artificial intelligence claims that we will have conscious machines someday, confusion is guaranteed in the ensuing argument.

Since Freud, we have learned to talk easily about unconscious thoughts, impulses, and desires. This too is a useful way of talking, as long as we understand that my unconscious desire, so called, is simply a desire I haven't noticed, or perhaps am unable to notice. But entire philosophical and psychological theories have been based on the notion that consciousness is a property of the desire itself, or of mental states generally; it's thought by some that the challenge to science and philosophy is to puzzle out just what it is that distinguishes a conscious state from an unconscious state. It's thought that some sensations have a property — consciousness — that others do not have. If we do indeed make this assumption, we can't avoid being stumped by the peculiarity of the supposed property. Some hope to conceptualize it as a variable and find a way to study it scientifically. But, so framed, the project is misconceived because, really, when I become aware of a sensation in my foot, it is I, not the sensation, who am conscious. The conscious sensation is no more conscious than a "hopeful" sign is actually hopeful.

Of course, we can choose to define "consciousness" any way we want, in terms of some property or other. Once we have so defined it, we can construct theories about it and even claim we have explained it. But then somebody inevitably objects that our definition has missed the essential meaning. These attempts in philosophy to define consciousness in terms of some observable property are prompted by such familiar problems as the other-minds problem, the zombie problem, and the Turing test problem, and by the question which generates all such problems: how do I justify my belief that you (or somebody else, or an animal, or perhaps a machine) are conscious?

Obviously, as a practical matter I use behavioral clues as evidence to answer the question: are you conscious? So philosophers and scientists, following Turing, have sometimes been tempted to conceive the very meaning of the question in terms of the behavioral clues. (This is a relic of the positivist theory of meaning, which says that the meaning of a proposition consists of the means of its verification.) But the clues, while they help to answer the question, do not define its meaning, or the meaning of my answer. What then is that meaning? I can wonder if you are conscious, in the first place, only if I have already realized that I am conscious. And it is only my realization

that I am conscious which defines what I mean by “conscious” or “consciousness”. What I have realized must be the actual referent of the word “consciousness”.

I don't wonder whether I'm conscious. I already realize that I'm conscious. My realization is peculiar in two respects whose significance is crucial. First, it is peculiarly obvious. And second, I don't attribute consciousness to myself on any grounds whatever. I haven't reasoned it out. I haven't looked for clues. I haven't decided what empirical evidence is relevant, and collected that evidence. No evidence is relevant. My realization that I'm conscious is neither verifiable nor falsifiable. It is not testable at all.

These peculiarities are the case because my realization is not the attribution of some property to some system. It has nothing to do with properties or their attribution. I may have a theory that I am this or that kind of a system, and I may have been led to assume that consciousness is a property of the system, but that is not what I actually realize. I don't conclude that I have passed an operational test. I don't actually check myself out to see if I exhibit any particular behavioral or functional properties. So such criteria do not define what I mean when I say that I am conscious. Therefore they cannot define what I mean when I conclude that you are conscious, unless we are willing to say that the term “conscious” is used here in two entirely different senses, which of course gets us nowhere.

No end of confusion is generated by the conflation of the two different distinctions: the distinction between subject and object and the distinction between mind and matter. The conflation generates an ambiguity in the meanings of the very terms “mind” and “consciousness” before analysis even begins. The ambiguity leads to equivocation — the shift of a term's meaning during the process of reasoning. In this case the shift is that “mind” and “consciousness” are used to refer sometimes to objects and sometimes to the subject, often in the same context or argument, without the shift being noticed. We inherit this conflation from Descartes, but have neglected to eliminate it along with his substance dualism. Having realized the subject, or consciousness-being, Descartes then went on to conceive the subject in objective terms, as “mind”, an immaterial substance in the world. “I” became “it”; subject was mistaken for a kind of non-spatial object, and all the familiar difficulties of the mind-body problem arose.

Descartes's mind/body distinction remains fundamental to the contemporary discussion even though few contemporary philosophers and scientists are substance dualists. Fundamental issues are still conceived in terms of, on the one hand, mind (sometimes called — in the interests of analytic tractability — mental events, mental states, or mental properties), and, on the other, body or matter (events in, states of, or properties of, the brain). The mind-body problem is taken to be the problem of how to conceptualize, describe, and account for the evident relationships between these two categories of phenomena.

In this traditional conception the subject is thought to be an aspect of mind, even while mind is thought to consist of such things as thoughts, feelings, sensations, pains, and emotions. But these are objects of awareness, not the subject aware of them. Simply in being aware of such mental objects I can distinguish them from myself as subject.

Much recent attention has been given to such problems as the relationship between mental objects and their neural correlates. The discussion often appears to assume that this is the fundamental philosophical problem of mind or consciousness. It is an interesting problem, to be sure, but it is not fundamental in the sense assumed, because it fails even to inquire how to conceptualize the subject as distinct from all objects, whether mental or physical.

We can discard Descartes's dualism and still retain two important insights he chose to emphasize. First, he recognized that there was something peculiarly obvious about the realization of consciousness. And second, he grasped the relationship between consciousness and being: "I think, therefore I am". His expression of what he realized may be thought problematic, but when you realize for yourself that you're conscious, the obviousness of what you realize is not compromised in the slightest by your difficulties in conceptualizing or expressing it.

In summary: for me to realize that I am does not in itself tell me what I am, beyond awareness. For me to wonder who or what I am implies that I have already realized that I am. I may not be sure who or what I am, but I do already know, and know for certain, that I am. The actual realization of consciousness and being, then, is prior to any particular concept of self, or any opinion about the nature of self, whether expressed in words or revealed in feelings or behavior. Theories and opinions come later, with the effort to conceptualize and integrate the insight.

The insight is not achieved by collecting information, however voluminous, or by philosophical analysis, however acute. The notion of evidence or argument is irrelevant. No evidence is required to demonstrate to me that I am, or that I'm conscious. No evidence could persuade me that I'm not.

So it is not simply a reasoned conclusion. It has rather to do with how you pay attention, and the point of view from which you pay attention. Of course, reason and conceptualization are prerequisites. As small children, we learn to talk, to conceptualize, and to reason, and we learn to call ourselves "I". This much is conceptual work. It is required as a precondition for the subjective realization "I am". But, just as insight into mathematical truth is not reducible to sensory experiences (even though without sensory experience no mathematical thought could have occurred in the first place), the truth of "I am" is not reducible to a conclusion drawn from any evidence. Something more is required: the development of the capacity for focusing awareness itself, or attention, in a particular way. The child first learns to say "I" while still as innocent of subjective insight as my dog. Only later does the next step occur, when the fact of his own being consciously dawns on him, as, in the normal course of human development, a new kind of focus becomes possible.

"I am" and "I'm conscious" are strange propositions. Of course, "I am" might be said in reply to a question about a property — "Are you hungry?" — in which case it is merely short for "I am hungry". It's not an explicit declaration of being. Otherwise neither of these propositions is something we would ever have occasion to remark to anybody else in any ordinary conversation. You have to resort to an unusual scenario to imagine it. I might, for instance, announce "I'm conscious" to inform you that the effect of an

anesthetic has worn off. Otherwise my only likely reason for actually ever saying such a thing is to call attention to this peculiar insight we share, which is simultaneously so trivial that it doesn't warrant ordinary expression at all, and so profound that it continues to defy comprehension.

So it does no good in this case, in the vein of analytic philosophy, to explore the possible "ordinary" uses of "I'm conscious", or of statements generally in the form "I am X" (I am running; I am eating supper; I am amused; I am six feet tall; I am seventy-two years old), for clues to the meaning of the subjective insight. In such cases I am attributing a property to myself. But my attempt to express the subjective insight is not quite an ordinary use, because it does not attribute a property. Nor is it an example of what the positivists denounced: a deviation from ordinary use to express a mere metaphysical speculation which could be dismissed (on their definition of meaning) as meaningless. There is nothing speculative or meaningless about it. How we talk about the insight is a difficult matter for philosophy, to be sure, but the insight itself is prior to the issue of its expression.

That the subject is not an object may indeed seem rather obvious, once "subject" and "object" are defined by reference to awareness and attention. If you examine what happens when you pay attention to something, even something as subtle and ephemeral as a passing thought, and find that you, who pay attention, can distinguish yourself from whatever you pay attention to, then the proposition seems true almost by definition. On the other hand, it has conceptual and theoretical implications which may be startling.

The Subjective Insight

I am the subject. If I should identify myself with some object, that identification is destroyed as soon as I pay attention to that object and notice that it is not from the object that I pay attention. So I am not anything that can be attended to. I am not anything detectable, anything that can be found anywhere. I am nowhere to be found. Here we have the "sort of indeterminacy principle" that Lewis Thomas mentioned, except that, actually, when you look for the subject as though it were an object, it doesn't "twitch and blur out of sight"; it was never in sight to begin with. Of course, this has been a controversial line of thought in western philosophy ever since Hume famously made the observation.

The subject/object distinction is not a philosophical hair to be split. If I think I consist of objects, and divide the universe into two parts, one consisting of myself, and the other consisting of everything else, then the whole process of alienation becomes possible. I imagine myself to be a separate being, and find myself in the standard human predicament. I have realized that I am, but have not realized who or what I am.

If I bother to wonder who or what I am, I may, in my eagerness for an answer, persuade myself that I'm this or that set of objects (there are many assumptions and theories to choose among, some listed above) or, more wisely, I may settle for admitting I don't know.

But if I actually want to explore further, it can't be by any investigation of objects or by any analysis of our more or less competent talk about objects. It can only be by further investigation of the subjective insight itself, whether by reason and reflection, or, more rigorously, in meditation. Meditation techniques have in common the study and control of awareness or attention. We learn by doing. We learn something about awareness by working with it directly in practice.

Meanwhile, on the conceptual or theoretical side, we have to deal with what may seem to be an opaque and impenetrable paradox. My awareness, once realized, is a more obvious reality than anything which may appear to me, because any appearance already presupposes awareness. Yet awareness itself does not appear. So awareness, the ground of all experience, can't be said to exist, in this strict sense. Existence, in the sense intended here, can be meaningfully predicated only of entities which actually appear or may potentially appear. This is a semantic stipulation intended to lubricate thinking. If you want to reject this strict sense on the grounds that it goes against our conventional semantic grain, you have to wonder whether our thinking is clarified or obscured by claiming the existence of something which could not appear under any circumstances whatsoever, to any awareness whatsoever.

The distinction between being and existence, then, is essentially a version of the distinction between subject and object, or awareness and appearance. Whether we agree on the vocabulary or not, I trust that you can make the actual distinction yourself by observing that your realization of your own being is not the same as your apprehension of any appearance. That I am is the most obvious of facts, but I don't exist as any kind of object in the world. That I don't exist, in this sense and context, means that awareness is not something that appears. Further comment on the difficult concept of "existence" is deferred until the next chapter.

You may balk at the claim that awareness does not appear. Does not appear? What about losing and regaining consciousness? What about going to sleep and waking up? What about anesthesia? Doesn't awareness appear and disappear? Surely our ordinary ways of talking and thinking suggest that it does. But consider an alternative, beginning with the simplest sort of example.

You can focus your attention on a sensation, say of your foot on the floor or of your bottom on a chair. A moment ago, reading, you were probably not aware of the sensation. Your focus was elsewhere; the sensation did not appear to you. But it appeared as soon as you turned your attention toward it. You became aware of it.

I trust that it is unobjectionable to say that a sensation, a sound, a sight, a feeling, or a thought can appear and disappear. Call whatever appears and disappears an object of awareness. Any object appears and disappears. The question asked here is: should I say as well that awareness also appears and disappears? Would it clarify our understanding to think of two things appearing and disappearing, rather than one?

An alternative is to think of awareness as continuing through different changes of focus. When you shift your attention from what you are reading to the sensation of sitting on a chair, what changes is the focus of awareness. Whenever you focus on this

or that, awareness is already prior. To say that an object X appears is to say that attention has been paid to it, distinguishing it from not-X.

This example is of an experience while conscious and wide awake. But again, what about going to sleep and waking up, losing and regaining consciousness? Shouldn't awareness be thought to appear and disappear, perhaps not with respect to any particular appearance, but in a more global respect?

The question has both empirical and theoretical aspects. Empirically, what, if anything, are we aware of during dreaming, dreamless sleep, deep anesthesia, and coma? While dreaming we are more or less vividly aware of something, much of which, however, fades promptly from memory. For the most part, an inquiry into awareness in the other states must be limited to indirect methods. Here memory is even less helpful. We immediately forget whatever we may have experienced, if anything at all. It would be imprudent to assert confidently either that we are or are not aware of something in these states.

One possibility is that awareness continues while appearance continually changes, whether or not we then remember what appeared. If we suppose instead that sometimes nothing appears to us, we have two alternatives. We are used to supposing that, when nothing at all appears, it is because awareness has ended. But we can as well think of awareness as continuing, though focused on nothing in particular, and distinguishing no objects. So far, either option may seem to frame our observations.

To simplify, consider awareness and appearance in the context of a single sensory mode: hearing. Sounds appear. We are aware of sounds. What sense are we to make of the concept of silence? Can we talk of experiencing silence? Can we actually focus our attention on silence?

It's probably safe to say that, unless we are stone deaf, we never experience total silence. Floating in an isolation tank shielding us from every possible ambient sound, we might still hear our blood, heartbeat, or tinnitus. Nevertheless, even if we never experience it, we know what "silence" means. It means the absence of sound. (Of course a person deaf from birth lives in constant silence, though without being in a position to actually realize silence, sound being unknown.) We can abstract silence from our actual experience of extreme quiet, together with the observation that any particular sound may appear and disappear.

There was a time, in preindustrial rural societies, when almost everyone had opportunities to experience, if not perfect silence, at least near-silence, a level of such quiet that the meaning of "silence" seems directly encountered. In the modern world such quiet is now rare for many of us, and almost unknown in our cities and suburbs. This may be a greater loss than is commonly realized. Some people who encounter silence, perhaps on a still night in the wilderness, when the wind has dropped and no distant drone of airplane or highway can be heard, report that the encounter touches something deep in them. They may describe how, after being busy, they quiet down and become aware of the silence. Once it is discovered, some find it uncomfortable, while others seek it again.

If you awake to silence in the wilderness and after a bit hear a sound, say a dog barking in the distance, what can you say about your attention? You hear the distant bark; your attention focuses on the bark as the only sound to appear. Where does it appear? In the silence. You attend to the bark. There seems also to be a sense in which you can speak of attending to the silence. That is, in silence you are aware of the absence of sound, of voidness, of nothingness. You can know this nothingness. It has a value. It might fill you with either fear or joy. You can flee it or seek it. You can say 'it'. But this awareness of silence is not the same as awareness of a sound. You can't focus on it in the same way that you focus on the bark. There is no object of attention to focus on in silence. Even if you call it 'it', silence itself is not an object, but an absence of objects.

Yet awareness of absence is not lack of awareness. It is not deafness, not anesthesia, not unconsciousness. On the contrary, silence can focus us marvelously, even if on nothing. To experience the silence fully is to become intensely focused, though on no object.

We don't say of silence that it is a sound which is in principle undetectable, or which twitches and blurs out of hearing when we try to attend to it. Silence is the absence of sound. Similarly, the subject is not some kind of undetectable object. Recognition of the subject, or of "pure" consciousness, usually begins with realization of the actual or potential absence of objects.

The distant bark is an object witnessed in the field of sound; silence is the voidness of this sensory field. There are, of course, the other senses, their fields, and their realms of objects. There can be an absence of stimuli to any of the senses, and an absence of objects in any of their fields. There can be an absence of objects in the field of conceptual thought. In themselves, all the sensory fields, and the field of thought, are void, but that voidness is not unconsciousness. It is a mistake to confuse it with content, objects, states, or properties of any kind.

The related propositions that the subject is not an object, and that consciousness is not a property, have radical implications. They imply that consciousness, or the subject, or the self as most narrowly defined, is not to be identified with any entities or processes to be found as objects of attention in the world. Such an implication is likely to be resisted, because its acknowledgment means abandonment of much current theory, indeed of an entire dominant paradigm.

Nevertheless, it now seems academically respectable to say that consciousness must be conceived as something deeper than a mere physical or functional property which some things have and some things do not. It has become almost respectable to argue that consciousness must be somehow a more fundamental feature of reality. It may now be possible to suggest, still further, that the concept of consciousness is actually a form of the concept of being.

In the subjective insight something is realized, something important enough to constitute an evolutionary threshold between humans and (probably) all other terrestrial species. It is not simply conceptual and is certainly not perceptual. My dog doesn't seem to realize it, and I didn't realize it at the age of three or four. How to express it? I

can say I realize that I am, or that I'm conscious, and that these seem equivalent. If they don't seem equivalent at first glance, I presume to suggest that this is because the common assumption is still that 'I am' refers to the existence of a person, or an organism, or whatever one's preferred set of objects may be, and that consciousness is a property of those objects.

When I realize that I am, or am conscious, I'm not realizing anything about any objects or contents of mind or awareness. I realize consciousness (or awareness, or subjectivity) itself. My realization that I am conscious is not tied to awareness of any particular objects. Indeed, it has more to do with realizing the potential absence of any particular object or objects. In realizing the potential absence of any particular objects, I realize myself or my being ('I am') as distinct from all objects.

To say that the concepts of consciousness and self are linked with the concept of being does imply a radical expansion of the discussion. If the concept of consciousness is hard, the concept of being, discussed further in the next chapter, is no easier. There is as yet no conceivable scientific approach to the problem of being, which is sometimes expressed as the ancient question: Why is there anything at all, rather than nothing? Actually, this question, as phrased, seems to pose the problem of existence: why are there objects, rather than nothing? Similarly, the basic problem of consciousness, as often conceived, can be expressed in the question: Why does anything appear at all, rather than nothing? This question too appears to inquire about objects. Yet both questions imply something further. The existence of individual objects presupposes their distinction from a ground of being; the appearance of objects presupposes a subject to which they appear.