

Dignāga's Argument for the Awareness Principle: An Analytic Refinement

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Introduction

Contemporary theories of consciousness can be divided along several major faultlines, but one of the most prominent concerns the question of whether they accept the principle that a mental state's being conscious involves essentially its subject being aware of it. Call this the *awareness principle*:

(Awareness) For any mental state M of a subject S (at a time t), M is conscious (at t) only if S is aware of M (at t).

Although analytic philosophers divide sharply on whether to accept the principle, the philosophy-of-mind literature appears to contain mainly arguments *against* it (e.g., Dretske 1993), rather than *for* it. One reason is that those who accept the principle often find themselves in a certain dialectical embarrassment: they take the principle to be so self-evident as to *allow* no cogent argument that would derive it from truths even more obvious than it. In what follows, I want to develop and defend an argument for Awareness. The argument is not new—in fact it is very old—but my specific development and defense of it are. The basic idea, presented originally by the sixth-century Indian philosopher Dignāga, is a combination of two thoughts: (i) all conscious states are states whose subject can remember at least at *some* later time, and

(ii) we can remember only events of which we were aware at the time of their occurrence.

I open, in §1, with brief comments on the dialectical and historical context of the argument. In §2, I offer an initial formulation of the argument, and compare it to some previous formulations. I consider various objections to the argument's first premise in §3, and to its second premise in §4. Some of these objections will occasion modifications of the argument's premises, so in §5 I will collect these modifications and formulate what I take to be the argument's strongest reconstruction.

1. Context

Arguments for Awareness tend to come as part of a case for a stronger thesis, namely, that every conscious state involves essentially a reflexive awareness of itself. Call this the *reflexivity theory*:

(Reflexivity) For any mental state M of a subject S (at a time t), M is conscious (at t) only if S is aware of M (at t) in virtue of being in M.

Reflexivity goes beyond Awareness in claiming that the subject's awareness of her own conscious state is built into that very state. *Once* we accept that being in a conscious state M requires being aware of M, the question arises of whether (a) the subject is aware of M in virtue of being in some other mental state M*, or (b) she is aware of M in virtue of being in M itself. Awareness takes no stand on this, but Reflexivity explicitly commits to option (b).

Because the reflexivity theory is stronger than the awareness principle in this way, the task of arguing for the former can be factorized into two parts. Part 1 is to argue that the subject must be aware of M for M to be a conscious state. Part 2 is to

argue that this awareness is due to the subject being in M itself, not in virtue of being in some other mental state. This second task has typically been addressed through an infinite-regress argument, according to which (very roughly) the supposition that a subject is aware of her conscious state in virtue of being in some numerically distinct mental state leads to an infinite regress of occurrent mental states. The debate on this argument has been lively both in Western and Eastern philosophy, but I set it aside here. For the part of the argument for Reflexivity that has embarrassed proponents more deeply has been the first: the task of arguing that conscious states must involve *some* awareness of them in the first place.

As noted, the source of the embarrassment is the feeling that Awareness is so ‘axiomatic’ that it is virtually impossible to find principles of even greater antecedent plausibility to derive Awareness from. But those who think that Awareness is too self-evident and too basic to be grounded in something even more fundamental still have this dialectical option: to clutch at an uncontroversial *symptom* of this awareness and work their way back to what might underlie that symptom.

This strategy is at play in an ancient argument for Awareness that makes its first appearance, to my knowledge, in the sixth-century manuscript *Pramāṇa-samuccaya* by the Indian Buddhist philosopher Dignāga. The argument is then discussed by a number of 7th- and 8th-century Buddhist philosophers, notably Dharmakīrti, Kumāriila, and Candrakīrti. It has also garnered considerable attention in recent Buddhist scholarship (see Williams 1998, Ganeri 1999, Perrett 2003, Yao 2005, Garfield 2006, Kellner 2010, and Thomsson 2011), with recent treatments by Kellner (2010, 2011) reaching new levels of scholarly rigor and meticulousness. Here I will take greater philosophic license, if you will, and use Dignāga’s words to develop what I take to be the strongest argument in the area.¹

2. The Argument

Dignāga writes that ‘it is unheard of to have a recollection of something without having experienced [it before]’ (1:11d); he then reasons that since ‘memory arises after experience, for the cognition just as for the object’ (1:11c), this shows that we experience our experiences at the time these occur.² The point may be put as follows. I have nice memories of Obama’s inauguration, but do not remember Bush’s. I also do not remember Lincoln’s. But the reason I do not remember Bush’s and the reason I do not remember Lincoln’s are very different: Bush’s I had already forgotten, but if I had a better memory, I could very well remember it; Lincoln’s I could never be said to remember, for the simple reason that I was *not aware of it when it took place*. To be coherently said to remember event *x*, it would seem one has to be aware of *x* when *x* takes place. Call this the *awareness constraint on remembering*.

The constraint applies not only to the remembering of external events, such as presidential inaugurations, but also to internal events, such as a thought occurring to one or an experience being enjoyed by one. Thus, I remember smelling fresh-brewed coffee in our kitchen this morning. (I remember the coffee and its odor, but in addition, I also remember my *experience* of that odor; the latter is an internal event.) And I remember *thinking* that I should get some of that coffee. Given the awareness constraint on remembering, it follows that when my experience and my thought were taking place, I was *aware* of their taking place.

The crucial claim of the argument is that every conscious state is *memorable*, in the weak sense that it is possible for the subject to remember its occurrence at some later time. If so, then given the awareness constraint on remembering, every conscious

state is such that its subject was aware of it at the time of its occurrence. To a first approximation, the argument may be presented, informally, as follows:

- 1) A subject can remember an event E only if she was aware of E when E occurred;
- 2) Every conscious state is such that there is some later time at which its subject can remember it; therefore,
- 3) Every conscious state is such that its subject is aware of it at the time of its occurrence.

A more hard-nosed presentation might be:

- 1) For any subject S, event E, and times t and t^* , such that (i) E occurs at t and (ii) $t^* > t$, if S can remember at t^* the occurrence of E, then S is aware at t of E;³
- 2) For any subject S, conscious state C, and time t , such that C is a state of S and C occurs at t , there is a time t^* , $t^* > t$, such that S can at t^* remember the occurrence of C; therefore,
- 3) For any subject S, conscious state C, and time t , such that C is a state of S and C occurs at t , S is aware of the occurrence of C at t .

In the next two sections, I examine the plausibility of each premise. The examination will produce various modifications and refinements that will hopefully lead us nearer an unobjectionable version of the argument.

Before doing so, a disclaimer: the reconstruction offered above is certainly not the first formal reconstruction of Dignāga's argument. A number of contemporary scholars have already offered formal or quasi-formal reconstructions of it (e.g., Ganeri 1999, Kellner 2011, Thompson 2011). However, these reconstructions typically run together the two tasks of an argument for Reflexivity distinguished above, whereas

the reconstruction proposed here attempts to distill the part of the reasoning that supports just Awareness. In consequence, in my reconstruction assumes a considerably more straightforward (and correspondingly more defensible) form. To underscore this point, compare the following reconstruction, to my knowledge the latest in the extant literature:

1. When one remembers (say) yesterday's vivid blue sky, one remembers not simply the blue sky, but also seeing the blue sky. In other words, one remembers not just the object seen, but also the visual experience of seeing. Thus the memory comprises both the objective side of the perception (the object seen) and the subjective side of the perception (the seeing).
(Phenomenological claim)
2. Thus no additional cognition is necessary in order to recall the subjective side of the original experience. (Phenomenological claim)
3. To remember something one must have experienced it. (Conceptual claim)
4. The causal basis for features of the present memory is corresponding features of the past experience. (Causal claim)
5. So the past visual perception must have included an experience of the seeing, along with the object seen. In other words, the perception must have included an awareness of itself as a visual perception, which is to say that it must have been reflexively self-aware. (Conclusion)
(Thompson 2011, 162)

In Thompson's hands Dignāga's argument requires additional premises (and 153 words instead of just 57!). In consequence, the argument takes a more cumbersome form, making Thompson concede that it is 'debatable' whether it is deductively valid and forcing him to construe it as a nondeductive argument by 'inference to the best explanation' (*ibid.*). This may have something to do with the fact that the conclusion of the argument, as reconstructed by Thompson, goes beyond the awareness principle and explicitly commits to the reflexivity theory. My own reconstruction aims to

establish nothing more than the awareness principle, and is accordingly simpler and more agile. It is unquestionable that the two-premise argument imputed presented above is deductively valid. The only question is how plausible the premises are.

3. The First Premise

Our first premise is that a subject can remember an event only if she was aware of it when it occurred. An immediate objection might be that one can remember that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815 without having even been *alive* that day, let alone *aware* of Napoleon's loss.

The correct response is to distinguish different kinds of remembering and get clear on the kind relevant to the argument. Psychologists distinguish between 'episodic' and 'semantic' memory (Tulving 1972). The former is an experiential memory involving recollection of past personal events; the latter is merely a form of propositional knowledge stored in long-term memory. In those terms, the kind of memory relevant to our argument is the episodic variety, but the one relevant to Napoleon is the semantic variety. Note that canonical reports of episodic memory take nominal complements ('S remembers *x*'), whereas canonical reports of semantic memory take that-clause complements ('S remembers that *p*'). It is thus significant that although I can be said to remember that Napoleon lost at Waterloo, I cannot (correctly) be said to remember Napoleon's loss at Waterloo. Our first premise is framed in terms of objectual rather than propositional remembering, which indicates that it concerns episodic memory; but to remove any uncertainties we may explicitly add the qualifier 'episodic' in it (and accordingly in the second premise as well).

Admittedly, a current-day madman may think he is Napoleon, and may report episodically remembering losing the Battle of Waterloo. He may even undergo imagery that, let us stipulate, happens to be qualitatively indistinguishable from Napoleon's largely veridical perceptual experiences on the day. Nonetheless, I think we can all recognize that unless he *was* in Waterloo on 18 June 1815, our madman cannot be truly said to *remember* losing the Battle. He may be said to be *under the impression* that he remembers losing the battle, or said to *seem to remember* it, but cannot be said to in fact remember it. If this is not a case of remembering, then it cannot constitute any counterexample to our first premise, since that premise is a claim about remembering.⁴

A second objection is that there are cases where we can be (correctly) said to remember an event even though we became aware of it only a certain amount of time after its occurrence. For example, I can be said to remember the 9/11 terrorist attacks, even though I became aware of the attacks only two hours after their occurrence.

In response, I would say that in the strictest sense, I cannot quite be said to remember *the attacks* of 9/11. Strictly speaking, I can be said to remember the *televised images* of the attack, and can also be said to remember the drama of that day; and one may usefully describe this as 'remembering 9/11' or even 'remembering the 9/11 attacks.' But in the strictest sense, only those who witnessed the planes hitting the towers, or the towers coming down, can be said to remember the attacks. Perhaps our premises should be strengthened with an explicit 'in the strictest sense,' but they are not fundamentally threatened by such cases.

More threatening are cases of delay built into the very nature of the original awareness. I can certainly be said to remember the sun being at location L earlier today, even though light takes a little over eight minutes to travel from the sun to the

earth, so that in reality I was not aware of the sun being at location L *at the time that it was*, but only eight minutes thereafter.

I can see two possible approaches to responding to this objection. One is to loosen sufficiently the relevant notion of simultaneity to allow for whatever additional time is needed for the causal process whereby E causes perception-of-E. The other option is to restrict the scope of the first premise to ‘nearby events,’ understood as events for which there is no pertinent time lag between their occurrence and perceptual awareness of their occurrence. (What does ‘pertinent’ mean? Perhaps: the time lag is shorter than the ‘specious present’ [James 1890], commonly thought to last about two seconds.) This second approach is inviting, because such a time lag is irrelevant to our awareness of our own conscious states, so the latter’s occurrences are in that sense ‘nearby events.’ I suggest we adopt this second option, since it requires least substantive philosophical commitment.

With the appropriate modifications in place, our first premise now reads:

- 1) A subject can episodically remember a nearby event E, in the strictest sense, only if she was aware of E when E occurred.

This version of the premise overcomes the proposed putative counterexamples. In the absence of other counterexamples, we should therefore accept it, at least provisionally.

4. The Second Premise

The second premise in the overall argument is that every conscious state is such that there is some later time at which its subject can remember it. Obviously, this does not say that every conscious state is such that its subject *actually* remembers it at some

future time. The claim is only about the *possibility* of remembering. Nor does the premise say that conscious states are such that at *every* future time their subject can remember them. The claim is only that for each conscious states there is *at least one* future time at which the subject can remember it.⁵ Perhaps that time occurs just five seconds after the experience, perhaps (also) a year later. But there is at least *one* time at which it is *possible* for the subject to remember her conscious state. (Thus it would be misguided to object that our second premise denies conscious experiences to amnesiacs. For while amnesiacs lack long-term memory, they certainly have working memory and could in principle remember an experience a couple of seconds after it took place.)

It might be objected that this premise is question-begging: insofar as Dignāga's opponent holds that we are not generally aware of our conscious experiences, she will happily deny that we *remember* them. In fact, she may claim that we only remember what our conscious experiences are *of*, not the conscious experiences themselves. Indeed, this appears to have been Kumāriila's objection to Dignāga.

In reality, however, there are independent reasons to think completely unstable the notion that episodic memory presents external events but does not present our original conscious awareness of them. We can see this in the way the view returns intuitively wrong results on the veridicality of certain memories (see, e.g., Fernández 2006). Suppose that in eighth grade Taylor smiled at me once during recess, but that I underwent a visual illusion at the time that made me convinced it was Sasha who smiled at me; for many years I would often reminisce about that one time the very popular Sasha had smiled at me. Then I get older, get married, and my memory of my schoolyard days becomes increasingly foggy. One day, in the autumn of my life, I

reminisce again about the good old days and seem to remember Taylor smiling at me during recess. Intuitively, I am misremembering – it is, after all, a kind of memory malfunction that conjures in me the episodic memory of Taylor smiling at me. But since this is what in fact happened, the view under consideration – the view that what episodic memory represents are only the external objects of our experience, not our experiences themselves – returns the result that I am remembering correctly.

The lesson is that either (a) episodic memory represents our experiences of external objects rather than these objects themselves, or (b) it represents *both* our experiences and their objects – perhaps even represents the objects *by* representing our original experiences of them (Fernández 2006, Thompson 2011). I happen to favor option (b), but either way Kumārila’s position is untenable.

The objector may retreat from the claim that *no* experiences can be remembered to the weaker claim that *only some* experiences can be remembered – while still maintaining that Dignāga is begging the question against her by claiming otherwise. In other words, the objector may present a ‘reversal argument’ that reasons from the falsity of Awareness to the thesis that some conscious experiences cannot be remembered. This reversal argument would look like this:

- R1) A subject can remember an event E only if she was aware of E when E occurred;
- R2) Some conscious experiences are such that their subject is unaware of them at the time of their occurrence; therefore,
- R3) Some conscious experiences are such that at no later time can their subject remember their occurrence.

However, it is important to appreciate a certain dialectical asymmetry between Dignāga’s argument and this reversal argument. The question we do not wish to beg

is whether the awareness principle is true or not. It is therefore significant that the reversal argument includes *among its premises* the negation of the awareness principle, whereas Dignāga's argument does *not* include among its premises the awareness principle; the principle shows up only in the argument's *conclusion*. It is true, of course, that Dignāga's argument's premises are such as to implicitly commit to the conclusion. But that is just how (deductive) arguments work. The fact that premises which do not explicitly take a stand on the truth of Awareness, and which can be motivated otherwise than by citing Awareness, nonetheless entail the truth of Awareness should therefore be taken to represent a genuine dialectical pressure in favor of Awareness.

A more pointed objection is that the memorability claim cannot be true of *every* conscious state, since plausibly, some conscious creatures *have* no episodic memory. Some insects, for instance, may have rudimentary experiences of their environment without having any capacity for recollecting them.

There are two possible responses to this objection. One is to restrict our second premise to *episodic-memory-capable subjects*. The claim would then be that every conscious state of a subject endowed with the faculty of episodic memory is such that its subject can remember it at some later time. This will yield a correspondingly weaker argument, with a weaker conclusion:

- 1) Only if a subject is aware of an event E when E occurs is it possible for her to later remember E;
- 2) Every conscious state of an *episodic-memory-capable* subject is such that there is some later time at which its subject can remember it; therefore,
- 3) Every conscious state of an *episodic-memory-capable* subject is such that its subject is aware of it at the time of its occurrence.

This conclusion is admittedly weaker. But first, it is already quite interesting and important, given that anyone reading this article is likely endowed with episodic memory. And secondly, one could probably argue abductively from the truth of the restricted thesis about the conscious states of memory-capable subjects to the truth of the unrestricted thesis about all conscious states. After all, the existence of episodic memory is not claimed here to *generate* the subject's awareness of her conscious state, but merely to proffer an instructive symptom of it.

The second response to the 'insect-based' objection involves a closer examination of a topic I have overlooked until now: the modal force of the 'can' in the argument's two premises. When we say that some insects may have conscious states that they cannot remember, we mean that it is not *nomic*ally possible for them to remember their conscious states.⁶ But this does not rule out a weaker claim, involving logical, conceptual, or epistemic modality. Consider an interpretation in terms of *conceptual* modality. The premise would then be that nothing in the concept of consciousness rules out a person's remembering her conscious state at a later time; it is consequently *conceivable* that there should be a later time at which the person remembers her conscious state. The price here is that the *first* premise of our argument would have to be substantially strengthened so as to make it *conceptually impossible* to remember an event one was unaware of at the time of its occurrence. More specifically, the argument would look like this:

- 1) For any subject S and nearby event E, if S is not aware of E when E occurs, then it is conceptually impossible for S to remember E later;
- 2) Every conscious state is such that it is conceptually possible for there to be some later time at which its subject remembers its occurrence; therefore,

- 3) Every conscious state is such that its subject is aware of it at the time of its occurrence.

Premise 1 here is quite strong. At the same time, note that our defense of the premise in the previous section was entirely a priori, appealing to conceptual observations about what it would take for a mental state to qualify as a genuine remembering. So for my part, I find no reason to shy away from a strong interpretation of Premise 1 in terms of conceptual modality.

It should be mentioned, in addition, that our two responses to the insect-based objection – the restriction to episodic-memory-capable subject and the appeal to conceptual modality – are compatible and could be deployed *together*.

It might be objected that both responses are insufficient, for we can readily conceive of creatures who exist for a single instant, in which they have a conscious experience. We may stipulate that these creatures possess the faculty of episodic memory (perhaps because it was beneficial to their ancestors, who enjoyed longer lives). Nonetheless, given that these creatures do not even *exist* later than their single conscious state, and existence is *conceptually necessary* for remembering, it is not conceptually possible for these creatures to remember their conscious state at a later time.

There are two possible responses to this objection. One is to restrict the premise to long-lasting creatures, with the result that the conclusion will initially apply only to long-lasting creatures (such as us!). But more perspicuously, we may introduce a certain scope disambiguation: our premise should be interpreted as saying not that for every conscious state there is a later time at which it is conceptually possible that the state be remembered, but that for every conscious state it is conceptually possible for there to be a later time at which the state is remembered.

The motivation for this wide-scope reading is clear: the conscious state of a single-instant creature may well be memorable; it is just that the creature does not have the opportunity to capitalize on its memorability by actually remembering it.

A final objection is that at most we are entitled to assume that every conscious state is such that its subject can *seem* to remember it, not that it is such that the subject can *actually* (i.e., *correctly*) remember it – for nothing guarantees that the subject will not misremember her earlier mental states. However, this objection is a non sequitur: even if it is conceptually possible for the subject to misremember her experience, it is *also* conceptually possible that she (correctly) remember her experience. That is, the two things can be true of a conscious experience at once: that it is conceptually possible to remember it and that it is conceptually possible to misremember it. One does not exclude the other. (In general, the propositions $\langle \text{possibly}, p \rangle$ and $\langle \text{possibly}, \sim p \rangle$ are perfectly compatible!)

5. Conclusion

If we combine all the main modifications and refinements employed during our defense of the memorability argument, we obtain the following argument:⁷

- 1) For any episodic-memory-capable subject S and nearby event E, if S is not aware of E when E occurs, then it is conceptually impossible for S to episodically remember E at some time after E's occurrence;
- 2) Every conscious state C of an episodic-memory-capable subject S is such that it is conceptually possible for there to be some later time at which S episodically remembers C;
- 3) Every conscious state C is nearby relative to its subject; therefore,

- 4) Every conscious state of an episodic-memory-capable subject is such that its subject is aware of it at the time of its occurrence.

As noted, 4 could then be claimed to be best explained by the notion that *all* subjects, not only episodic-memory-capable ones, are aware of their conscious states at the time of their occurrence.

Just to ensure we leave no stone unturned, here is the modified hard-nosed variant:

- 1) For any episodic-memory-capable subject S, nearby event E, and time t , such that E occurs at t , if S is not aware of E at t , then it is conceptually impossible for there to be a time t^* , $t^* > t$, such that S episodically remembers at t^* the occurrence of E;
- 2) For any episodic-memory-capable subject S, conscious state C, and time t , such that C is a state of S and C occurs at t , it is conceptually possible for there to be a time t^* , $t^* > t$, such that S episodically remembers at t^* the occurrence of C;
- 3) For any subject S and conscious state C, C is nearby relative to S; therefore,
- 4) For any episodic-memory-capable subject S, conscious state C, and time t , such that C is a state of S and C occurs at t , S is aware of the occurrence of C at t .

To my mind, no better argument for the awareness principle has been produced since Dignāga's time, east or west of the Ganges. In fact, I *believe* this argument.⁸

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¹ Some scholars have taken Dignāga's goal to be to argue not just for Awareness, but for Reflexivity. I do not have the expertise to weigh in on this debate. My interest here is in remarks made by Dignāga that I take to support Awareness. In what follows, I will refer to this as 'Dignāga's argument'; but I am happy of course to rename this the 'Dignāga-inspired argument.'

² Not being a Buddhist scholar myself, the translations I offer are borrowed from prominent Buddhist scholars. For 1:11c, I am using Kellner's (2010: 210) translation. For 1:11d, I am using Ganeri's (1999, 473). Kellner (2010, 213; 2011, 415) offers instead 'memory does not apply to what was not experienced [before],' while Williams (1998, 9) offers the following translation: 'One does not see the recollection of that object which has not been experienced.' These clearly all point in the same direction.

³ I am using the symbol ">" to mean "later than" (as is common in the relevant discussions).

⁴ This emphasis on the character of 'remember' as a success verb may be thought to create pressure on the second premise of the argument, since it will require that every conscious state be *correctly* memorable. But as we will see at the end of the next section, the pressure is not very threatening.

⁵ This formulation is not exactly accurate, actually; but by the end of this section the inaccuracy will be removed.

⁶ And when we proposed restricting the premise to episodic-memory-capable subjects, we attempt to defend the nomic possibility of such subject remembering their conscious state at a later time.

⁷ I drop the 'strictest sense' qualification to avoid unnecessary complexity.

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