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Romeijn, Jan-Willem

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Commentary on Gallagher “Body Self-Awareness: Multiple Levels or Dynamical Gestalt?”

JAN-WILLEM ROMEIJN

12.1 INTRODUCTION

Shaun Gallagher’s chapter exemplifies a phenomenological approach to conceptual issues in psychiatry. The chapter is concerned with body self-awareness, namely the experience or realization that one’s body belongs to oneself. This is relevant to psychiatry because some psychiatric patients, specifically schizophrenics, experience their own body or mind as being controlled by something or someone else, or as somehow not belonging to themselves. Patients report experiences of depersonalization or alienation: “When I look down I see my legs and body but it feels as if it was not there” and “I feel pains in my chest, but they seem to belong to someone else, not to me.” These reports reveal that, on the one hand, patients consider their body parts as belonging to themselves, experiencing a “sense of ownership,” while on the other hand they consider the body parts as separate or even alien. How are we to make sense of such experiences? And can we make sense of alienation with regard to cognitive and affective states in a similar way?

Gallagher’s contribution is to claim that such experiences and realizations can be integrated in a theory of “dynamical Gestalts,” a view of the self that derives from Husserl’s phenomenological theory of consciousness. Gallagher arrives at this claim after carefully considering and evaluating different views on the origin and nature of our body self-awareness, and on our wider sense of ownership over cognitive and affective states. The chapter discusses proposals by Dreyfus, Bermudez, Dainton, Campbell, and Bartolotti and Broome. A recurring concern in the discussions is whether we can think of body self-awareness as being derivative of introspective insights or more basic experiential facts, like proprioception and sensorimotor responses, through an act of reflection. Gallagher’s

conclusion is that such “deflationary” accounts of body self-awareness cannot properly make sense of the double nature of the afore-mentioned experiences of alienation. Our sense of ownership cannot be based on a reflective insight into the cognitive, affective, or physical aspects of oneself, because that would leave unexplained why we consider the items from which we feel alienated as, after all, belonging to ourselves, despite the overriding feeling of alienation.

Gallagher’s claim is that the theory of dynamical Gestalt does offer an adequate account of such alienation experiences while ensuring the basic unity of the self. According to this theory, a basic sense of ownership is weaved into the very fabric of our pre-reflective experiences. Body parts are automatically experienced as belonging to their owner. Against this backdrop of mineness, generated pre-reflectively and as part of experience, those body parts may subsequently seem alien, or controlled by forces outside of oneself, as a result of disturbances in the sense of agency or in the reflective relations that obtain between a patient and their body parts. In much the same way, the pre-reflective experiences of mental and affective states have a sense of ownership weaved into them. Disturbances in one’s experiences of these states may then bring about a feeling of alienation without impinging on the mineness of the states.

12.2 THIS COMMENTARY

In what follows I will discuss Gallagher’s arguments and conclusions in three parts. First I consider the intricate dialectic on reflective and pre-reflective senses of ownership between Bermudez, Dainton, and Gallagher, questioning its conceptual exactness and empirical content. Then I consider the rejection of the intrinsic sense of ownership by Bartolotti and Broome, investigating if it matters that their arguments pertain primarily to thought insertions rather than bodily alienation. Finally, I focus on the implications that the dynamical Gestalt theory has for the issue of explanatory levels, arguing that the theory is in need of further development. Towards the very end of my commentary, I consider the phenomenological approach to psychiatry more broadly, commending particular aspects of it. This ends with concrete suggestions on how the approach might offer improvements to current psychiatric science, relying on insights that derive from the history of the natural sciences and the reception of this history in the work of Husserl.

12.3 CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS

Gallagher's chapter starts by drawing up a number of distinctions. Sense of ownership is set apart from sense of agency and a distinction is made between personal and perspectival ownership. Personal ownership involves an explicit act of self-identification while perspectival ownership derives from the fact that the subject occupies a special position with regards to what is experienced as belonging to itself, which therefore leaves open the possibility that the subject experiences a sense of ownership pre-reflectively. These distinctions help Gallagher to focus the discussion, namely on sense of ownership, and to locate the phenomenological view, namely as involving pre-reflective experience. The accounts of self-awareness by Bermudez, Dainton, Bartolotti and Broome are criticized from this phenomenological standpoint. Dreyfus' idea that awareness of the body is entirely absent in many automated tasks is discussed in a separate section but then more or less left aside, because most authors agree that some body awareness is involved in all activity.

Bermudez and Dainton acknowledge that a sense of ownership is mostly present in our bodily activity. But, by the lights of Gallagher's discussion, they present it as following from the complex of experiences of the subject and her specific perspective on her own actions. According to Bermudez and Dainton, the sense of ownership is nothing over and above these bodily experiences, and it manifests when attention is actively directed at them. The metaphor is that of the "fridge light"; it only switches on when the door of the fridge is opened. Gallagher rejects these conceptions of sense of ownership by pointing to its pre-reflective nature. In the phenomenological view the sense of ownership does not derive from the experiences as an add-on; it is inherent to it. Note that the distinctions drawn here are multiple: the issue is whether the sense of ownership is derived from the experiences of oneself, and accessed in an act of reflection, as opposed to intrinsic to these experiences, and already available pre-reflectively. The opposition is therefore between reflective and pre-reflective, but also between derivative and intrinsic.

In response to this first part of the paper, I would like to raise two concerns. First, as a relatively uninformed reader, I do not find it apparent that the categories of experience used in the discussion are sharply delineated, nor that they exhaust the space of experiential possibilities. I can imagine reflective awareness to come in degrees rather than in binary format, and I can only draw the exact dividing line between derivative and intrinsic when further assumptions on ontological dependence are put

in place. Furthermore, admittedly after some mental yoga, it seems possible to entertain reflective experiences in which the sense of ownership is intrinsic, thereby escaping the double opposition that Gallagher identifies.

A second concern ties in with this first one. We might try to settle the above concerns over unsharp concepts and distinctions by tying them to experience in a systematic way. Naturally this need not, and perhaps cannot, be the experimental operationalization known from psychological science. A proceduralization along the structuralist lines of Titchener may be more feasible. However, at present it is unclear how we are to relate the concepts and distinctions to our private experiences. How can we connect the concepts to experiences, or to phenomena, let alone to empirical fact? I will return to this concern at the end of my comments.

12.4 CRITICISMS OF AN INTRINSIC SENSE OF OWNERSHIP

After discussing Billon's challenges to accounts of sense of ownership, and endorsing the requirement that they must clarify experiences of alienation in the bodily, mental and affective realm in equal measure, Gallagher moves on to discuss Bartolotti and Broome. Their view pertains primarily to delusions of control and thought insertions, and therefore in first instance to the loss of a sense of agency. Bartolotti and Broome hold these experiences ultimately hinge on a lacking sense of ownership. However, they explicitly reject that this sense of ownership is pre-reflective and intrinsic, advancing three problems for an account based on such an intrinsic notion. All three problems, in one way or another, indicate that making the sense of ownership inherent to the experience itself does not give us enough of a conceptual grip on the alienation experiences, and that we need to involve a reflective self-narrative to explain them.

In all three cases, Gallagher's response is that the intrinsic sense of ownership is indeed not the full story about these experiences, but that such an intrinsic sense of ownership provides the basis for that story. And insofar as the alienation experiences are concerned with body self-awareness, Gallagher's response might well be right: it seems that the phenomenological theory can be developed to resolve the problems that Bartolotti and Broome put forward. In fact the solutions that Bartolotti and Broome themselves offer, which turn on the subject's reasons for acting, can be given a phenomenological underpinning, by tracing the disturbance in the reflective self-narrative back to pre-reflective experiential disruptions. Gallagher can subsume the ideas of Bartolotti and Broome under his own account.

It is less clear to me, however, that the response is adequate if the problems signalled pertain not to delusions of control but to thought insertions, which is what Bartolotti and Broome seem to focus on. If the states from which a subject feels alienated are themselves mental, i.e., cognitive or affective, then it is entirely natural to look for the source of the feelings of alienation in the reflective response to an initially aberrant thought. After all, the thought item that generates the alienation is itself already located in the mental realm. It seems somewhat contrived to me to insist that ultimately the feelings of alienation originate in a disruption of the pre-reflective experience of having the thought, without involving the inevitable reflective response to the thought. Now Gallagher indicates in his chapter that a phenomenological account of thought insertion cannot be developed in parallel to an account of delusions of control, and perhaps this is why the response seems less natural or adequate to begin with. On the other hand, one of Billon's challenges is precisely that an account of the feelings of alienation has to cover the bodily, mental and affective realm in equal measure. A complete phenomenological account will also have to answer to the problems for thought insertions that Bartolotti and Broome outline. At present it is, as far as I can see, missing from the discussion.

12.5 THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

In the final two sections of the chapter, Gallagher presents the phenomenological theory of dynamical Gestalt in more detail. The theory is offered as a response to Billon's challenges to provide a "common ground C" among all instances of a sense of ownership. The accounts of Bermudez, Bartolotti, or Broome all look for this common ground in reflective or introspective attributions. Such attributions are most easily associated with what is normally deemed a higher explanatory level. Against this, Gallagher proposes to follow a phenomenological approach, and start from a pre-reflective sense of ownership, which is more naturally associated with so-called lower explanatory levels. The direct experiential sense of ownership then serves as a basis for further reflective and pre-reflective experiences.

What eventually provides this basis is Husserl's retentive-protentional structure of experience: the way in which our experiences are embedded in time, in how we live from moment to moment. Experiences just passed are folded into the present moment to provide context, and future experiences are brought into the present moment through anticipation. Gallagher claims that it is inherent to our way of relating to

the passage of time that the experiences that have just passed, and the actions we are preparing, are felt as belonging to us. This is presumably what makes the sense of ownership intrinsic to pre-reflective experience.

Now it seems right that our ability to tie together our experiences and entertain them as sequential is key to our experiential integrity. And, following a Humean conception of personhood, it might indeed be all there is to our experience of self. We therefore get the sense of ownership as an immediate consequence of the nature of experience itself. More cautiously, I would say that the unity of experience, as described by Husserl, is a pre-requisite for any account that ties the experiences to a notion or conception of self. It is not evident to me that the sense of ownership follows from the unity of experience alone. That it is me experiencing these things cannot be derived just from the temporal unity of the experiences.

Quite apart from this, it is not clear where the phenomenological approach to the sense of ownership leaves us in the debate over the salience of, or relations between, explanatory levels. The emphasis on pre-reflective awareness and experience might suggest that lower-level processes take precedence in our accounts of alienation. But Gallagher rightly points to the complex interplay between levels in experiences of alienation, ranging all the way from motor control processes to social, cultural and political factors. Examples of alienation through racial discrimination from Fanon show, convincingly in my view, that the roots of experiences of alienation may lie on any of these levels. It speaks very much in favor of the theory of dynamical Gestalt that it is versatile in this respect, and that it allows us to bring any of these factors into focus. However, both on the point of the intrinsicality of our sense of ownership and on the point of explanatory levels, the phenomenological account of body self-awareness is in need of further development.

12.6 CONCEPTUAL CHANGES

The comments of the foregoing are directed at certain arguments and conclusions in Gallagher's chapter, and mostly selected for their critical content. If we zoom out and look at the chapter as part of a bigger project on the conceptual foundations of psychiatry, the text has a lot to recommend itself. Witnessing Husserl's own description of phenomenology in "The Crisis of the European Sciences" (Husserl 1954/1970), one of its central goals was to provide the sciences of the mind with a conceptual framework of their own, in which our specific introspective access to the

mental realm could be accommodated. It is in my view very fitting that modern phenomenology is put to work in clearing up conceptual issues in psychiatry, and in developing theoretical notions for it. As illustrated in Gallagher's chapter, phenomenology may help psychiatry to obtain a better conceptual grip on the empirical phenomena under study. And depending on one's philosophical tastes, it thereby also benefits philosophy, because the application will direct phenomenology away from more speculative or, more critically, self-involved endeavors.

While philosophical phenomenology will have a lot to offer to more positivistic psychiatric science, which has been focused mostly on what can be inter-subjectively ascertained, I would like to end my commentary with a positivist suggestion. Consider Husserl's own example of conceptual construction, as a parallel to what phenomenology might achieve for the sciences of the mind, namely Galileo's attempts to frame and thereby illuminate the movements of massive bodies. Following the arguments from the *Discorsi*, it may be thought that Galileo came upon the notions of inertial mass and impetus, and onwards to the success of the new mechanics, by purely speculative means. But historians of science have long since concluded that Galileo did conduct physical experiments, dipping lead balls in ink and flipping them up to study their trajectories along an inclined plane, rather than merely speculating mathematically on their paths. The suggestion is that he was able to develop his mechanics by cleverly matching theoretical terms to experimental practice (cf. van Dyck 2006). The development of new concepts is best undertaken, it seems, when one is immersed in the practical application of a science, and in direct contact with the topic under scrutiny. Scientific knowledge thereby gets embodied in an experimental setup or in an environment that manifests, by how it is constructed, a partly theoretical reality.

Hence my suggestion would be to take phenomenology's finely tuned conceptual instruments from their bookish surroundings, and start using them, first and foremost in the clinic, to see how they can aid the psychiatrist and the patient in their therapeutic contact, and then also in the lab, where they might inform the decisions of psychiatric scientists. By analogy to Galileo's conceptual achievements, our best hope of coordinating the concepts from phenomenology onto the raw phenomena of mental disorder lies in the focus on a practice. That is where distinctions between reflective and pre-reflective experience, and between intrinsic and derived sense of ownership, can ultimately be grounded and prove their value.

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