



Being for no-one

Psychedelic experience and minimal subjectivity

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Abstract

Can there be phenomenal consciousness without self-consciousness? Strong intuitions and prominent theories of consciousness say “no”: experience requires minimal self-awareness, or “subjectivity”. This “subjectivity principle” (SP) faces apparent counterexamples in the form of anomalous mental states claimed to lack self-consciousness entirely, such as “inserted thoughts” in schizophrenia and certain mental states in depersonalization disorder (DPD). However, Billon & Kriegel (2015) have defended SP by arguing (inter alia) that while some of these mental states may be totally self-less, those states are not phenomenally conscious and thus do not constitute genuine counterexamples to SP.

I argue that this defence cannot work in relation to certain experiences of ego dissolution induced by potent fast-acting serotonergic psychedelics. These mental states jointly instantiate the two features whose co-instantiation by a single mental state SP prohibits: (a) phenomenal consciousness and (b) total lack of self-consciousness.

One possible objection is that these mental states may lack “me-ness” and “mineness” but cannot lack “for-me-ness”, a special inner awareness of mental states by the self. In response I propose a dilemma. For-me-ness can be defined either as containing a genuinely experiential component or as not. On the first horn, for-me-ness is clearly absent (I argue) from my counterexamples. On the second horn, for-me-ness has been defined in a way that conflicts with the claims and methods of its proponents, and the claim that phenomenally conscious mental states can totally lack self-consciousness has been conceded. I conclude with some reflections on the intuitive plausibility of SP in light of evidence from altered states.

Keywords

5-MeO-DMT · Consciousness · DMT · For-me-ness · Hallucinogen · Psychedelic · Self · Self-awareness · Self-consciousness · Subjectivity

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1 Introduction

Can there be phenomenal consciousness without any form of self-consciousness? Philosophical intuitions and prominent theories of consciousness say “no”. According to what Billon and Kriegel call the Subjectivity Principle (SP), all phenomenally conscious mental states exhibit “subjectivity”, or minimal self-awareness. On this view, not only does every phenomenally conscious mental state belong to a subject, but every phenomenally conscious mental state is *experienced* as belonging to a subject (Billon & Kriegel, 2015, p. 29).

SP faces apparent counterexamples in the form of anomalous mental states claimed to lack self-consciousness, such as “inserted thoughts” in schizophrenia and disowned mental states in depersonalization disorder (DPD). However, Billon and Kriegel suggest that, while some of these mental states may totally lack self-consciousness, those states also lack phenomenal consciousness and hence do not constitute genuine counterexamples to SP. The success of this manoeuvre is unclear; a reasonable person could either accept or reject Billon and Kriegel’s analysis of these cases. Thus, the debate over the possibility of totally selfless phenomenal states seems to be at an impasse.

Here I attempt to break this impasse and advance the debate by introducing and analysing new cases. I argue that psychedelic drug research furnishes clearer counterexamples to SP than depersonalization or thought insertion, and that Billon and Kriegel’s *Consciousness* Response* (see section 2 below) cannot succeed in relation to these new cases. Specifically, I argue that certain experiences of ego dissolution induced by the potent and fast-acting psychedelics DMT and 5-MeO-DMT jointly instantiate the two features whose co-instantiation by a single mental state SP prohibits: (a) phenomenal consciousness and (b) total lack of self-consciousness or “subjectivity”. My grounds are simple: these mental states exhibit all the features that Billon and Kriegel deem sufficient for a verdict of total selflessness in other cases, while exhibiting none of the features on which they base their denial of phenomenal consciousness in such cases.

One possible objection to my arguments is as follows: while my psychedelic counterexamples may lack “me-ness” (explicit awareness of the self) and “mine-ness” (explicit awareness of a mental state as owned by the self), they surely cannot lack “for-me-ness” (awareness of *the mental state* by the self, Guillot, 2017). The objection thus asserts Universalism about for-me-ness: the claim that all phenomenally conscious mental states, without exception, have this property (Farrell & McClelland, 2017).

In response I propose a dilemma for Universalists about for-me-ness. To defend Universalism against my counterexamples, they need to define for-me-ness precisely. There are two options: either it contains a genuinely experiential component or it does not. If it does, then Universalism about it ought to count as refuted by my counterexamples, on pain of unfalsifiability. If it does not, then for-me-ness has been defined in a way that conflicts with the explicit claims and dialecti-

cal strategies of its proponents, and the claim that phenomenally conscious mental states can totally lack self-consciousness has effectively been conceded. Moreover, Universalism about a deflationary, non-experiential for-me-ness faces other problems. Notably, it is vulnerable to a debunking argument informed by evidence from altered states. We can satisfactorily explain the *intuition* that mental states are “given to” or “accessed by” selves or subjects, without assuming that any selves or subjects actually exist.

2 Subjectivity theories and the unconsciousness defence

In recent decades, philosophers and scientists have proposed many theories of phenomenal consciousness. One group of theories shares a common strategy: explaining how mental states become phenomenally conscious in terms of some relation of *access* or *awareness* between subjects and those mental states (O’Brien & Opie, 2015). Billon & Kriegel (2015) – henceforth B&K – call these “subjectivity theories” of consciousness. They list three prominent sub-types. Acquaintance theories hold that mental states are phenomenally conscious just when their subjects stand to them in a *sui generis* relation of acquaintance. On this view, of all our mental states, the phenomenally conscious ones are those with which we are acquainted in the relevant way (Levine, 2001). Higher-order theories hold that mental states are phenomenally conscious just when they are meta-represented by a suitable kind of higher-order mental state (Gennaro, 1996). And self-representation theories hold that mental states are phenomenally conscious just when, in addition to their other contents, they represent themselves *as* being mental states of the subject whose they are (Kriegel, 2009).

According to B&K, all three types are committed to the following Subjectivity Principle (SP):

(SP) Necessarily, a mental state M exhibits phenomenal consciousness only if M exhibits subjectivity. (Billon & Kriegel, 2015, p. 30)

It is possible to question whether all of these theories are in fact committed to SP, as defined by B&K (Millière, 2017).¹ However, I will not pursue that exegetical question. Rather, I will focus on the question whether SP itself is plausible; the answer will have consequences for any theory of consciousness that is in fact committed to SP.

What, then, is “subjectivity”? Discussing the experiences of drinking apple juice and drinking a banana smoothie, B&K note that these experiences are

¹Millière points out that the notion of “subjectivity” is ambiguous, and suggests that some subjectivity theories only posit a very minimal form of subjectivity as necessary to all conscious experiences. However, the subjectivity of Billon & Kriegel (2015) seems to be a richer affair, involving explicit awareness of the self or its ownership of a mental state. These distinctions are discussed in much more detail below.

different in many respects [...]. But there is also one respect in which [they] are exactly the same: in both cases it is *for you* that it is like something to have them. By this we mean **not only that both experiences are yours, but more strongly that both are experienced as yours**. We call this the *subjectivity* of experience. Your apple-juice and banana-smoothie experiences are different in gustatory and tactile respects, but are the same in respect of subjectivity. (Billon & Kriegel, 2015, p. 29, italics original, bold mine)

If we take this definition at face value, then subjectivity has both a metaphysical and an experiential component. To have subjectivity, a mental state *M* must both (a) *be “yours”* (i.e. belong to some subject), and (b) *be experienced as “yours”* (i.e. be experienced by that subject *as* belonging to that subject). This hybrid aspect of subjectivity will become important later.

SP says that all phenomenally conscious mental states exhibit subjectivity; on B&K’s construal of the latter, this entails that all phenomenally conscious mental states are experienced by their subjects as *belonging to*, or *being had by*, those very subjects. Thus, a phenomenally conscious mental state whose subject did not experience it as their own *in any way* would falsify SP (Millière, 2017). B&K’s paper is devoted to the question whether psychopathological conditions furnish such counterexamples. They discuss two candidates: “inserted thoughts” in schizophrenia, and disowned mental states of patients with depersonalization disorder (DPD).

In thought insertion, patients claim that thoughts which are not their own are occurring within their minds:

Thoughts are put into my mind, like “Kill God”. It is just like my mind working, but it isn’t. They are not my thoughts. They belong to this guy, Chris. They are his thoughts. (Frith, 1992, p. 66)

I look out the window and I think that the garden looks nice and the grass looks cool, but the thoughts of Eamonn Andrews [a famous television personality] come into my mind. There are no other thoughts there, only his [...]. He treats my mind like a screen and flashes thoughts onto it like you flash a picture. (Mellor, 1970, p. 17)

It is easy to see the apparent problem for SP. These patients are describing mental states occurring within their mind; it seems that those mental states are phenomenally conscious; yet the patients deny that the mental states *belong* to them, that the thoughts are *their thoughts*. They report instead that the thoughts belong to some external agency: perhaps “this guy, Chris” or the television personality Eamonn Andrews. It seems that there can be phenomenally conscious mental states lacking subjectivity.

Of course, matters are not so simple. One response on behalf of SP is to deny the intelligibility or coherence of the patients’ reports, which are extremely difficult for non-patients to understand. After all, these reports are made by people whose ordinary mental functioning is compromised. B&K do not want to take

this route, however. They accept (as do I) the methodological constraint that we ought to try to make sense of patients' reports, and take them at face value absent some positive reason to do otherwise; and they note that in many cases of "alienation symptoms", there is no independent evidence that the patients suffer from generalised irrationality or reasoning deficits.

Another option is what B&K call the Subjectivity* Response: denying that the mental states in question lack subjectivity *in the sense relevant to SP*. A standard version starts from the observation that patients suffering from thought insertion clearly do experience the thoughts as theirs, in the minimal sense of *occurring within their minds*. It is only because the condition involves experiencing thoughts as not one's own *but occurring within one's mind* that it is remarkable, theoretically puzzling, and troubling to patients. In light of this observation it has become commonplace to distinguish between the phenomenal senses of *agency* and *ownership*: the sense that one is the author of a mental state, and the sense that one is undergoing a mental state, respectively. Inserted thoughts can then be explained as mental states that lack the sense of agency (prompting the delusional attribution to an external agent) while retaining the sense of ownership (Billon & Kriegel, 2015). Assuming that the sense of ownership is the form of "subjectivity" relevant to SP, this principle can thus be preserved.

B&K argue that such accounts of thought insertion cannot do justice to the phenomenological facts – specifically, cannot account for the phenomenal difference between inserted thoughts and other types of thoughts (such as intrusive thoughts in obsessive-compulsive disorder) which arguably lack the sense of agency. Instead, B&K question the idea that thought insertion results from the *subtraction* of some phenomenal feature possessed by non-inserted thoughts. They propose instead that inserted thoughts have an extra phenomenal feature which non-inserted thoughts lack: a positive *sense of alienation* or *phenomenology of insertion*. They note that this hypothesis is consistent with the reports of patients, who complain about some positive, extra feature of their thoughts which is distressing to them: the feature of *being* (or *seeming to be*) *authored by an external agent*.

However, B&K do not think this "something extra" response will work for the alienation symptoms of depersonalization disorder (DPD), in which many patients emphatically complain of something *missing* from their experience. DPD is characterized by a persistent and distressing feeling that the self is unreal or non-existent; thoughts, actions, and (to an extent) affective responses persist, but the usual sense that these are happening to *me* (i.e. to the subject) is drastically reduced or altogether absent. Patients describe feeling detached or estranged from the self and its states:

I feel some degree of "out of it" all the time [...] I can sit looking at my foot or my hand and not feel like they are mine. This can happen when I am writing, my hand is just writing, but I'm not telling it to. It almost feels like I have died, but no one has thought to tell me. So, I'm left living in a shell that I don't recognize any more (Sierra, 2009, p. 27; quoted from Billon, 2017, p. 739)

I suddenly wonder: is it really me here? Is it really me walking? Then I make enormous efforts in order to apply my consciousness to this unconsciousness [...] in order to realize that I am making the walking movements. So at some point during this kind of crisis, before the absolute certainty [of being myself, before the crisis] I am conscious on one side that I am unconscious [sic] on the other side. (Séglas & Meige, 1895; quotation from Billon & Kriegel, 2015, p. 45, interpolations original)

According to B&K, none of the standard responses on behalf of SP is clearly applicable to such mental states as these. There are no independent grounds for deeming these patients irrational or their reports unintelligible; their explicit insistence that something is *missing* from their experience precludes a “something extra” response; and their emphatic denial of *any* form of subjectivity problematizes other types of Subjectivity* response. However, B&K propose an ingenious strategy which they call the Consciousness* Response: they concede that the mental states in question totally lack subjectivity, in the sense relevant to SP, but *question whether these mental states are conscious* in the sense relevant to SP² (cf. Billon, 2013, 2015).

SP precludes the possibility of *phenomenally conscious* mental states lacking subjectivity. Phenomenally conscious mental states are just those that have qualitative feel; in Nagel’s (1974) famous phrase, they are states that there is *something it is like* to be in. B&K suggest that perhaps the totally subjectivity-free mental states of DPD patients are not phenomenally conscious; there is nothing it is like for the patients to have these mental states. At first blush, this seems absurd: how could patients describe these states if there was nothing that it felt like for the patients to be in those states? However, as B&K point out, the ability to report on a mental state does not in fact imply that it is phenomenally conscious. It only implies that the state is *access conscious*, in Block’s (1995) sense: that it is available for verbal report and the guidance of behaviour.

Phenomenal consciousness and access consciousness are conceptually dissociable: we can understand what it would mean for a mental state to have some qualitative feel or character, despite being so fleeting and evanescent that it could not guide behaviour or verbal report, and we can understand what it would mean for a mental state to be capable of guiding verbalization and behaviour causally or computationally, despite lacking qualitative character. Some authors have ar-

²Strictly speaking, B&K do not commit themselves to any views about which response works best for which putative counterexample. As they put it, they simply present a “menu of options” for those who wish to defend SP against pathological counterexamples. However, they make clear that they see the Consciousness* Response as the most plausible option – more plausible than a “something extra” response, or other Subjectivity* Responses – for the specific DPD cases that they discuss. This is because patients’ reports of these cases are difficult to interpret in terms of “something extra” rather than something missing, or in terms of some form of subjectivity (e.g. the sense of ownership) being retained. These features are shared (I argue) by my new counterexamples below.

gued that phenomenal and access consciousness in fact dissociate; notably, Block (2011) holds that perceptual consciousness contains phenomenal qualities which “overflow” the limits of cognitive access.

These issues are controversial. But B&K’s point stands: the fact that DPD patients can report on their mental states does not unproblematically entail that these states are phenomenally conscious; it may be a case of access consciousness without phenomenal consciousness. And, they argue, to the extent that we have good reason to believe SP, this is exactly what we should conclude is occurring. Moreover, according to B&K, the Consciousness* Response is not an *ad hoc* manoeuvre with nothing to recommend it beyond the preservation of a favoured theory. They quote descriptions from DPD patients which seem to hint at the idea that their disowned mental states indeed lack phenomenal consciousness:

I just sink into a kind of unconsciousness. I am just conscious enough to know that things are going on around me but nothing seems to register.

I’m like a zombie unable to take in any information.

It’s the mental sensibility that is lacking, it is not me who feels. I have no interest in what I appear to be feeling. It is someone else who feels mechanically. (quotations from Billon & Kriegel, 2015, emphasis theirs)

B&K are not claiming that DPD patients *totally* lack phenomenal consciousness – merely that the specific mental states they describe as lacking subjectivity also lack phenomenality. One possibility is that the disowned mental states, which are themselves phenomenally unconscious, are meta-represented by phenomenally conscious higher-order representations that inform verbal reports. But the phenomenal/access consciousness distinction also raises the possibility that disowned states could influence verbal report “directly”, even while not being phenomenally conscious.

In short, B&K argue that neither inserted thoughts nor disowned mental states in DPD constitute conclusive counterexamples to SP. According to their preferred responses, inserted thoughts do not lack subjectivity, but rather have “something extra” – a positive phenomenology of alienation – while disowned mental states in DPD may lack subjectivity, but if so, are not phenomenally conscious, and therefore do not falsify SP.

3 Psychedelic mystics are not zombies

Even in relation to their DPD cases, the plausibility of B&K’s Consciousness* response is questionable. The reports from DPD patients quoted above do not unequivocally support a denial of phenomenal consciousness. B&K highlight one patient’s description of themselves as “like a zombie”, which evokes the notion of *philosophical zombies*: behavioural and functional duplicates of ordinary humans,

bereft of phenomenal consciousness (Chalmers, 1996). However, as B&K themselves emphasise, we should be wary of interpreting patients' reports through the lens of specialised philosophical and scientific jargon that these patients could not be expected to command. Further, use of the language of "feeling" – as in "it is not me who feels... It is someone else who feels mechanically" – can just as readily be interpreted as describing states which *are* phenomenally conscious – there is something that they feel like – but lack subjectivity, since it is (seemingly) not *for the self* or "I" that they feel like something.

However, the various treatments of thought insertion and DPD offered by B&K have some plausibility; a reasonable person might conclude that they defuse the putative counterexamples to SP. Personally, I am agnostic regarding the status of the specific examples discussed by B&K. It is not obvious whether these are genuine cases of phenomenally conscious mental states that totally lack subjectivity. The debate seems to be at an impasse.

One way to proceed would be to analyse B&K's examples more closely, to determine (for instance) whether the Consciousness* Response really does offer an adequate treatment of disowned mental states in their DPD cases. Here I take a different approach: I attempt to advance the debate by introducing new cases. There are other unusual mental states which, in my view, furnish clearer counterexamples to SP than the thought insertion and DPD cases discussed by B&K. These states exemplify all the features on which B&K base their verdict that subjectivity is absent from DPD states: the subjects who undergo these states explicitly describe something missing from their experience, precluding a "something extra" response, and support for intelligibility-denial is lacking, since there is no evidence that these subjects suffer from any deficit in rationality or that their reports are incoherent. Indeed, since these cases involve mentally healthy subjects who undergo temporary consciousness alterations voluntarily, and report them retrospectively, the untenability of intelligibility-denial is even clearer than in DPD.

However, descriptions of the mental states in question, unlike those of B&K's DPD cases, provide no support for a denial of phenomenal consciousness.³ Indeed, these mental states are typically described as being vividly and memorably conscious (cf. Millière, 2017). The states in question are experiences of total ego dissolution induced by injecting or smoking the potent fast-acting serotonergic psychedelic drugs N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT) and 5-methoxy-N,N-dimethyltryptamine (5-MeO-DMT).⁴

³My argument does not rely on the claim that DPD states in general are categorically distinct from the types of psychedelic states I discuss. One might worry that there is no sustainable contrast because the psychedelic states are just transient DPD-type episodes. (I am indebted to an anonymous referee for raising this worry.) However, even if this is so, the argument still goes through, as long as the states I describe (a) are equal to B&K's DPD cases in terms of evidence that subjectivity is lacking, and (b) relevantly different to B&K's cases in terms of lacking evidence for consciousness-denial. In what follows, I try to show that these conditions are met.

⁴I believe that my arguments also apply to some experiences of "selflessness" or "emptiness" induced voluntarily by expert practitioners of *Vipassana* meditation; see, e.g., Dor-Ziderman,

DMT and 5-MeO-DMT are naturally occurring molecules. When smoked or injected in suitable doses they induce a brief but intense altered state of consciousness (Sessa, 2012). Like other “classic” psychedelics such as LSD and psilocybin, they are believed to alter consciousness primarily via 5-HT_{2A} receptor agonism (Nichols, 2016). And like other classic psychedelics, their phenomenological effects are complex and variable, being influenced by the individual’s psychological state and the external environment (“set and setting”, Zinberg, 1984). DMT and 5-MeO DMT can induce dramatic changes to perception, affect, thinking, and the senses of space, time, and embodiment. Most relevantly, at high doses they can occasion experiences described as a total loss or dissolution of the sense of self or ego. Here is a research subject administered intravenous DMT:

I immediately saw a bright yellow-white light directly in front of me [...]. I was consumed by it and became part of it. There were no distinctions – no figures or lines, shadows or outlines. There was no body or anything inside or outside. I was devoid of self, of thought, of time, of space, of a sense of separateness or ego, or of anything but the white light. There are no symbols in my language that can begin to describe that sense of pure being, oneness, and ecstasy. There was a great sense of stillness and ecstasy. (Strassman, 2001, pp. 244–245)

Taken at face value, this report describes a phenomenally conscious mental state completely lacking subjectivity; during the peak of the episode, this volunteer’s phenomenal field seems to have been occupied entirely by visual sensations of brilliant white light, plus feelings of “pure being, oneness, and ecstasy”.

Such experiences of total ego dissolution are reported relatively uncommonly by users of DMT (Strassman, 2001). However, total ego dissolution seems to be a more typical effect of 5-MeO-DMT. Users of 5-MeO-DMT frequently describe

an experience of “emptiness,” “nothingness” or “void” which is associated with a cessation of thoughts, extreme sensory deprivation and a complete loss of self-consciousness: [...] “I felt that there was nothing to me and there was nothing around me” [...]; “the reality around me disintegrated into nothing. I fell into a void [that] I can’t even describe” [...]; “I wasn’t anything anymore. I had been broken down into nothingness, into oblivion” [...]; “my thoughts ceased to exist, and my senses shut off completely. I could not hear, see, smell, taste or feel anything” [...]. (Millière et al., 2018, p. 16; for further discussion, see Millière, 2020, this issue)

A clear and eloquent description of total ego dissolution induced by 5-MeO-DMT is provided by Michael Pollan:

Berkovich-Ohana, Glicksohn, & Goldstein (2013) and Ataria, Dor-Ziderman, & Berkovich-Ohana (2015) and, for discussion, Millière, Carhart-Harris, Roseman, Trautwein, & Berkovich-Ohana (2018).

I felt a tremendous rush of energy fill my head [...]. Terror seized me – and then, like one of those flimsy wooden houses erected on Bikini Atoll to be blown up in the nuclear tests, “I” was no more, blasted to a confetti cloud by an explosive force. I could no longer locate [myself] in my head, because it had exploded that too, expanding to become all that there was. Whatever this was, it was not a hallucination. A hallucination implies a reality and a point of reference and an entity to have it. None of those things remained.⁵ (Pollan, 2018, pp. 276–277)

In Pollan’s case and that of the DMT subject, we are dealing with mentally healthy volunteers providing lucid and coherent descriptions of utterly unusual states of consciousness. There are no grounds for concluding that these subjects are afflicted by any deficit of rationality at the time of making their retrospective phenomenological reports, nor for deeming these reports incoherent or unintelligible. Indeed, despite the longstanding conception of psychedelics as “psychotomimetic” (psychosis-mimicking) drugs (Sessa, 2012), a growing body of evidence suggests that psychedelic experiences are associated with *improved* mental health outcomes (Johansen & Krebs, 2015), especially in controlled conditions (Santos et al., 2016). It is true that *acute* psychedelic intoxication involves increased suggestibility and tendencies towards magical thinking (Carhart-Harris, 2013; Carhart-Harris et al., 2015). However, numerous studies of regular religious users of serotonergic psychedelics find that, in the sober state – which is when such retrospective experiential descriptions are given – their neuropsychological functioning and mental health status is comparable to that of matched controls (Barbosa, Mizumoto, Bogenschutz, & Strassman, 2012; Barbosa et al., 2016; Bouso et al., 2012, 2015).

A different reason for mistrusting these descriptions might be that psychedelic experiences are transient and notoriously difficult to describe. How can we be confident that these retrospective reports really reflect the phenomenological reality of the intoxication, rather than subsequent confabulation? A straightforward answer comes from the fact that psychedelic ego dissolution seems to have distinctive neural correlates, in the form of modulation and disintegration of the Default Mode and Salience networks – both neural systems independently implicated in generating the phenomenal sense of self, and modulated by contemplative practices that aim to alter the sense of self (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). In multiple studies, ego dissolution under psychedelics has been linked to diminution or modulation of known neural signatures of self-consciousness,⁶ suggesting that volunteers’ reports reflect a phenomenological reality and are not objectionably theory-contaminated (Lebedev et al., 2015; Tagliazucchi et al., 2016).

⁵I am grateful to Raphaël Millière for bringing the significance of this report to my attention.

⁶Of course, the neurocognitive mechanisms of self-awareness remain controversial, so this argument cannot be regarded as conclusive. However, the fact that systems consistently disrupted by psychedelics have repeatedly been linked to self-awareness by non-psychedelic evidence must carry some weight against the theory-ladenness objection.

Of course, it would be logically consistent for a proponent of SP to deny that the mental states being described by these volunteers are phenomenally conscious. A Consciousness* Response to these cases is not *impossible*. However, it is implausible and evidentially unwarranted. The only positive evidence supporting such an analysis of B&K's DPD cases is the fact that patients use relevantly suggestive language, such as talk of being a "zombie" or of "unconsciousness". No such language is used by these psychedelic subjects, who are very clear that they are describing intense and memorable *experiences*. There is no positive evidence that these mental states lack phenomenal consciousness. The only grounds for such a conclusion would be an antecedent theoretical conviction that they *must* lack it, if they lack subjectivity.

At this point it might be objected that there *are*, in fact, positive grounds for thinking that these psychedelic volunteers lost phenomenal consciousness: they describe losing all the mental contents that typically characterise phenomenally conscious states. Perhaps, the thought goes, their remarkable *experiences* amount to the disintegration and subsequent reintegration of the ego or self-model – the transition phases in and out of egolessness – while the "peak" of the experience, totally lacking self-consciousness, is a window of phenomenal unconsciousness.⁷ This analysis does not seem plausible for Strassman's DMT subject, who emphasises the phenomenal presence of white light, pure being, oneness, and ecstasy, despite the phenomenal absence of self, thought, time, space, and so forth. However, it has more initial plausibility in relation to Pollan's experience, and that of the other 5-MeO-DMT subjects quoted by Millière et al. (2018), who tend rather to describe their experiences in negative terms, speaking of sensory deprivation, nothingness, or a "void [that] I can't even describe".

The inference is unwarranted, however. Even if (some of) these subjects lost all ordinary phenomenal contents, this does not entail that they lost phenomenal consciousness altogether, unless one *assumes* that there can be no states of phenomenal consciousness that lack those contents. But that would be question-begging in the present context. Indeed, 5-MeO-DMT subjects typically insist that their experiences are remarkable precisely in virtue of (a) lacking all the contents of ordinary experiences but (b) being conscious experiences nonetheless.

Moreover, some subjects describe an experience of pure bodiless, egoless, non-spatial, non-temporal consciousness that features *affective* phenomenal content. For example, the subject quoted by Millière et al. (2018) as saying that "my thoughts ceased to exist, and my senses shut off completely. I could not hear, see, smell, taste or feel anything" goes on to say:

When I say, "I couldn't see", you shouldn't think that I was seeing blackness as a symbol of nothingness. I truly saw nothing. I ceased to have any memory of that sense [...]. Fortunately, despite the extreme sensory deprivation, I was still having a great experience [...].

⁷I am grateful to Thomas Metzinger, Raphaël Millière, and an anonymous referee for pressing different versions or aspects of this objection.

I entered a state of infinite bliss that was so incredible that it seemed totally impossible [...]. The joy and ecstasy [sic] I felt was absolutely infinite. (Report #37301 from www.erowid.org)

Likewise, Pollan goes on to say:

Unfortunately, the terror didn't disappear with the extinction of my "I". Whatever allowed me to register this experience, the post-egoic awareness I'd first experienced [while intoxicated] on [psilocybin] mushrooms, was now consumed in the flames of terror too. In fact every touchstone that tells us "I exist" was annihilated, and yet I remained conscious. "Is this what death feels like? Could this be it?" That was the thought, though there was no longer a thinker to have it. (Pollan, 2018, p. 277)

Despite reporting the loss of all sense of self or ego, these subjects are clearly describing conscious experiences; in the first case, an experience of infinite bliss, joy, and ecstasy, and in Pollan's less fortunate case, an experience of "post-egoic" terror. These descriptions do not suggest a temporary loss of phenomenal consciousness.

There are no grounds, either, for conceptualizing these states of consciousness as containing "something extra" vis a vis subjectivity, at least not by B&K's lights: these subjects are at least as explicit as the DPD patients quoted above in describing *something missing* from their experience⁸ ("devoid of self [and] a sense of separateness or ego"; "[none] of those things *remained*"). My conclusion is that these expe-

⁸An alternative interpretation of reports like Pollan's is that they describe not ego dissolution, but ego *expansion*. Language such as "expanding to become all that there was" might be taken to suggest that in such states, the felt sense of self does not disappear, but expands to become co-extensive with the entire phenomenal field (cf. Fink, 2020, this issue). On this view, when subjects describe a "total loss" of self or ego, this is not a theory-neutral phenomenological observation; it is a description which is inferred in dependence on the contentious assumption that a phenomenal sense of self requires a phenomenal self-world distinction. The suggestion is that subjects *experience* the loss of the phenomenal self-world *distinction*, or of *ego-boundaries*, but then engage in a theoretically loaded description of this as a total loss of *self* or *ego*.

I find it more plausible that the descriptions of ego loss represent a genuine phenomenological reality. It is not clear why, for instance, Pollan would say that there was "no longer a thinker to have [the thought]", if there was still a (boundaryless) sense of self or ego in his experience. However, I am indebted to an anonymous referee for insisting on the difficulty of deciding conclusively between these two interpretations. It is fair to say that more research is required on this point, possibly utilising new psychometric instruments or techniques such as "microphenomenological" interviewing (Petitmengin, 2006; cf. Millière, 2017; Sebastián, 2020, this issue).

Interestingly, an analogous point can be made about the use of subjective-seeming language in retrospective descriptions, as when Pollan says: "every touchstone that tells us 'I exist' was annihilated, and yet I remained conscious". The second "I" might be taken as betraying a phenomenological fact – that some minimal form of self-awareness or subjectivity remained – or merely as reflecting longstanding and deep-seated linguistic and conceptual habits that make it very difficult, in the sober state, to speak or think of consciousness without speaking or thinking of someone who was conscious. This is discussed in more detail in the final section of the present paper.

periences constitute counterexamples to SP: phenomenally conscious mental states that completely lack subjectivity. At least, that is what we should conclude if we accept B&K's analyses of their cases.

4 The universalist objection

I have claimed that there are no grounds for a Subjectivity* response in the psychedelic cases since in these cases (unlike in thought insertion) subjects claim explicitly that the relevant mental states lack all forms of phenomenal subjectivity. B&K seem to take a similar view of the DPD states they discuss: that a Subjectivity* response is not very plausible, since patients claim quite explicitly that the relevant mental states are totally bereft of all phenomenal subjectivity. They reject agency- and endorsement-based versions of the Subjectivity* response as inadequate to thought insertion, and hence adopt the “something extra” response for this condition. Rejecting the “something extra” response as inadequate to DPD, with its explicit descriptions of “something missing”, they turn next to the Consciousness* response without considering other Subjectivity* Responses. This suggests that they judge agency, endorsement, and other Subjectivity* responses also inadequate to their DPD cases.

If one rejects all Subjectivity* responses for B&K's DPD cases, then one ought to reject them for the psychedelic cases I have discussed. The descriptions of these cases as totally selfless are *at least* as clear as the analogous descriptions of the DPD cases. Nonetheless, there is a possible version of the Subjectivity* Response that might be made. This response starts from the observation, formulated clearly by Guillot (2017), that terminological ambiguities plague recent discussions of “subjectivity” and “minimal self-awareness”.

Guillot distinguishes between three varieties of minimal self-awareness. One, which she calls “me-ness”, is an explicit, “egological” form of self-awareness – the self or subject is encountered as a content of consciousness among others. Another, which she calls “mineness”, is an explicit awareness of the *ownership relation* between the self and its mental states – a phenomenal sense of a mental state as being *owned by me*. Finally, what Guillot calls “for-me-ness” is described as a “special inner awareness” of *the mental states themselves, by the subject*. Although Zahavi and others do characterise for-me-ness as a form of self-awareness or subjectivity – albeit a non-egological form – it does not therefore amount to an explicit, conscious awareness of *the self*. Rather it consists in the self or subject's awareness of *its mental states* – which implies a self or subject who is thus aware, thereby constituting an implicit form of self-awareness.

For-me-ness is sometimes characterised as the “first personal givenness” of conscious mental states, or as the “special inner awareness” that each subject has of her own conscious states – or, as Zahavi and Kriegel (henceforth Z&K) put it:

the “me” of for-me-ness is not in the first instance an aspect of *what* is experienced but of *how* it is experienced; not an object of experience, but a constitutive manner of experiencing. To deny that such a feature is present in our experiential life, to deny the for-me-ness or mineness [sic] of experience [...] once *anything* occurs consciously, **it must be given to the subject and thus exhibit for-me-ness**. In other words, the “me” of for-me-ness is not a separate and distinct item but rather a pervasive feature of experiential life as such. (Zahavi & Kriegel, 2015, p. 38, italics original, bold mine)

In short, for-me-ness is awareness of mental states (by the subject), me-ness is awareness of the self or subject, and mineness is awareness of the ownership relation between them. As Farrell & McClelland (2017) point out, Guillot’s tripartite distinction gives rise to nine target theses. Concerning any of the three varieties of subjectivity, one might be a Universalist, claiming that it is present in all conscious experiences without exception; a Typicalist, claiming that it is present in typical conscious experiences but absent from at least some atypical ones; or an Absentist, claiming that it is absent from all conscious experiences.⁹

Within this framework, a defender of SP might offer the following Subjectivity* Response to my psychedelic cases: *Granted, your cases refute Universalism about me-ness and mineness, since they present clear cases of phenomenally conscious mental states which lack both of these features. However, these cases do not refute Universalism about for-me-ness. Nothing in the descriptions of these cases indicates that the subjects lack a special, inner awareness of the remarkable mental states they undergo, or that these states are not given to them in a distinctly first-personal way. Indeed, they must have such an awareness, otherwise why would it be a remarkable episode in their biography qua conscious creature to undergo these states? How would they know what these states are like without being aware of these states in a way that is special, inner, and direct – a way that differs profoundly from the way in which you or I are aware of their psychedelic experiences? Moreover, for-me-ness is the sense of “subjectivity” that is relevant to SP. Therefore, while the psychedelic states may lack Subjectivity*, i.e. me-ness and mineness, they do not lack Subjectivity in the sense relevant to SP, i.e. for-me-ness, and thus do not refute SP.*

Call this the Universalist Objection to my psychedelic case against SP. It argues that (i) for-me-ness is the sense of subjectivity relevant to SP, and (ii) my examples do not lack for-me-ness, so (iii) my examples do not refute SP.¹⁰

The Universalist Objection has some initial plausibility. In particular, when we look at the examples that B&K give of subjectivity theories – acquaintance theory, higher-order representationalism, and self-representationalism – it seems correct that the relevant sense of subjectivity is more akin to for-me-ness than to me-ness

⁹Strictly speaking, these do not exhaust the possibilities, since one might hold (for instance) that one of the three varieties is present only in atypical, and absent from typical, experiences.

¹⁰For a distinct but closely related argument, see Sebastián (2020), this issue.

or mineness (Millière, 2017). These theories do not attempt to explain phenomenal consciousness in terms of awareness *of* the self, but in terms of awareness *of* mental states *by* the self. In different ways, they each unpack the intuition that conscious mental states are ones that the self or subject is aware of, that are somehow present *to* or *for* the subject (Levine, 2001, pp. 8–9; O’Brien & Opie, 2015).

Thus, it seems correct that the sense of “subjectivity” relevant to SP is for-*me*-ness rather than *me*-ness or mineness. Granted this first premise, the success of the Universalist Objection depends on the second premise that my case studies, even if they refute Universalism about *me*-ness and mineness, do not refute Universalism about for-*me*-ness. To assess this claim, we need to get clearer on what exactly for-*me*-ness is – and it is a notoriously elusive notion.

At a first pass, the proponent of the Universalist Objection confronts a dilemma. Recall that subjectivity, as B&K define it, incorporates both a metaphysical and an experiential component. They say that a mental state has subjectivity when it “not only [*is*] yours [the subject’s] but [also *is*] *experienced* as yours [i.e. experienced by the subject as the subject’s]”. Taken literally, this defines subjectivity as a conjunctive property consisting in the co-occurrence of (a) an objective ownership relation between subject and mental state and (b) a phenomenal awareness of that ownership relation by the subject. This would seem to make subjectivity something like a combination of Guillot’s (phenomenal) mineness with an objective ownership relation.

My purpose is not to fixate unduly on the idiosyncrasies of specific formulations. However, to assess the claim that Universalism about for-*me*-ness survives the putative psychedelic counterexamples, we need to know precisely what sort of thing for-*me*-ness is supposed to be. Specifically, we need to know: is it an *experiential*, or phenomenal, feature – something that makes a positive difference to what an experience is like? Z&K call this a “non-deflationary” construal of for-*me*-ness. Or is rather it a metaphysical/epistemic feature, consisting in some purely objective relation between a subject and a mental state; for instance, the bare fact that a subject is *aware of*, or *accesses*, a given mental state in a way unavailable to no other subject? This, they call a “deflationary” construal. For the purposes of my argument, I will locate conjunctive or hybrid construals of for-*me*-ness, which define it as a combination of experiential and metaphysical features, on the first horn of the dilemma. Thus, the dichotomy is between a non-deflationary (wholly or partly experiential) and a deflationary (wholly non-experiential) construal of for-*me*-ness. I take the horns in turn.

Suppose the presence of for-*me*-ness necessarily involves some specific experiential feature. In this case, it is hard to see what could constitute a clearer counterexample to Universalism about it than the psychedelic cases above. Descriptions of 5-MeO-DMT experiences such as Pollan’s are so emphatic in their rejection of “a reality and a point of reference and an entity” that there seems to be no possible *phenomenal* feature in virtue of which they could instantiate for-*me*-ness. A Universalism about any non-deflationary construal of for-*me*-ness that does not

count as falsified by an experience like this runs the risk of becoming unfalsifiable, a declaration by fiat that any phenomenally conscious mental state *ipso facto* possesses for-me-ness. But “for-me-ness” cannot be merely a synonym for “phenomenal consciousness” – else, whence the controversies over whether the former is a necessary condition of the latter?¹¹

Suppose, on the other hand, that for-me-ness is (per the deflationary interpretation) a merely metaphysical/epistemic, in any event *non-experiential*, property. Several problems arise for this supposition. The first is that it is clearly at odds with how prominent advocates of for-me-ness define the term. Z&K explicitly adopt a non-deflationary, experiential interpretation, and B&K’s definition of “subjectivity” includes an experiential component. Second, the methodological practice of defenders of SP shows that they are concerned with an experiential feature. By conducting detailed analyses of the *phenomenology* of pathological mental states, B&K and, to a lesser extent, Z&K demonstrate that the kind of subjectivity relevant to their interpretation of SP is one that makes a genuinely experiential difference. Third, to adopt a deflationary reading of for-me-ness is to change the subject (as it were.) The psychedelic cases were meant to establish that there can be phenomenal consciousness without any kind of *self-consciousness*. This conclusion stands even if all phenomenally conscious mental states are, as a matter of objective fact, accessed or undergone by some subject. Finally, universalism about a deflationary for-me-ness is independently suspect, on theoretical grounds that I will mention briefly later.

The second horn – a deflationary interpretation of for-me-ness – is thus a non-starter. Let us return for a closer look at the first horn. How is a Universalist likely to respond to my insistence that these psychedelic cases clearly lack any conceivable non-deflationary (phenomenal) form of for-me-ness? As a counterexample to SP, Lane (2012) presents the case of patient DP, who experienced visual perceptions allegedly lacking any sense of subjectivity, and could only establish that the visual perceptions were his own via a subsequent process of explicit inference. Z&K argue that, despite lacking many more robust forms of self-consciousness, DP’s experience retains for-me-ness:

¹¹ A version of universalism which may not fit easily into this taxonomy is that proposed by Kriegel (2009): that subjectivity is a determinable of which specific phenomenal characters are determinates. On this view, the relation of for-me-ness to other phenomenal qualities would be akin to the relation of *having colour experience* to *having red experience*, *having blue experience*, and so forth. (I am indebted to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.) I lack the space to explore this possibility here, but will simply note that, if *for-me-ness* or *subjectivity* is to be more than a mere synonym for “phenomenal consciousness”, then there must be some possibility of debating whether all phenomenal qualities are in fact determinates of *this specific determinable*, which is related somehow to self or subjectivity; and in this case, the arguments I offer on each horn of the dilemma would seem to be clearly relevant. If the determinable/determinate view amounts to more than “all phenomenal qualities are determinates of the determinable *phenomenally conscious*”, then the question whether all phenomenal states are either (a) phenomenally structured in a first-personal way or (b) metaphysically given to a self or subject, must be relevant to its truth.

Consider the following variety of overall conscious experiences: being absorbed in a movie; laboriously trying to decipher a menu written in a language you barely know; being suddenly hit in the face by a snowball; being humiliated by your peers; standing on the ten-meter diving board, trying to convince yourself to jump. In addition to the various items such experiences present, they also differ phenomenally with respect to the kind of self-consciousness they instantiate. When comparing such experiences, it should be evident that self-consciousness can vary quite a bit along a spectrum in its experiential acuity or intensity. The kind of experiential for-me-ness we have in mind is a sort of *minimum point* of self-consciousness. This minimal self-consciousness is present in DP's experience in the same way it is present in thought-insertion patients. (Zahavi & Kriegel, 2015)

The first point to make here is that, if DP's experience really manifests only the *minimum point* of self-consciousness, then it should be conceded that Pollan's 5-MeO-DMT experience lacks self-consciousness altogether. The reason is that it seems quite clear that Pollan's experience manifests less in the way of self-consciousness than DP's.¹² DP was still able, via an inferential effort, to establish the existence of a ownership relation between his visual experiences and their subject *while these experiences were occurring*. In Pollan's case, no phenomenological trace remained of a reality, an entity, or a point of reference; at the peak of his experience, there was no sense, idea, or conception of a subject to whom the experience could possibly belong (even though he was able to infer his ownership of the experiences retrospectively, once the episode of selfless phenomenality had ended.)

The second point I want to make connects the foregoing observations about Pollan's experience with an important argument made by Z&K. We can call this the *Descriptive Indispensability Argument* for the reality and ubiquity of for-me-ness. It responds to a common criticism: that the notion of for-me-ness does no explanatory work, or at least none that cannot be done better by other explanatory posits.

Z&K deny this, but they also argue that, even if it is true, belief in for-me-ness is still warranted. On what grounds? Explanatory adequacy, they say, is not the only reason for believing in an entity or property; *descriptive* adequacy also matters. In order to try to explain the various properties of phenomenal consciousness, we must first be able to describe them, and "it is impossible to correctly *describe* the structure of phenomenal consciousness without citing for-me-ness" (Zahavi & Kriegel, 2015, p. 45).

Up to a point, Z&K are entirely correct. I am no Absentist about a non-deflationary, *purely* experiential construal of for-me-ness – the notion, or something like it, is indeed required to correctly describe the structure of the vast majority of phenomenal states (cf. Metzinger, 2003). But the descriptive

¹²Though see Millièrè (2019) for a sceptical perspective on the idea that self-consciousness comes in degrees.

indispensability point cuts both ways. It is true that we cannot adequately and completely describe the structure of my sober experiences of smelling coffee or seeing a rose without mentioning the presence of for-me-ness. Nor, however, can we adequately and completely describe the structure of Pollan's 5-MeO-DMT experience *without mentioning the absence of for-me-ness*. If the descriptive indispensability of for-me-ness establishes its existence, then the descriptive indispensability of its negation refutes its universality. To underscore the point, consider how Z&K distinguish for-me-ness from other, less controversial phenomenal features:

Experiential for-me-ness is not a quality or datum of experience [...]. [It] is not that in addition to the objects in one's experiential field [...] there is also a *self-object*. Rather the point is that each of these objects, when experienced, is given to one in a distinctly first-personal way, and that this givenness is a pervasive dimension of phenomenal life [...]; one grasps such experiential elements as lemon-qualia and mint-qualia by appreciating what *varies across* such phenomenal characters, but grasps what for-me-ness is by appreciating what *remains constant* across them. (Zahavi & Kriegel, 2015, p. 38)

Quite – and one can grasp an experience like Pollan's in its utter uniqueness only by appreciating that it lacks what remains constant across nearly all conscious experiences, including those of inserted thoughts: the apparent fact (the *seeming*) that experiential objects are “given to [some]one in a distinctly first-personal way”. It is hard to see how this phrase can have any phenomenological content whatsoever without describing precisely that feature of virtually all conscious experiences *whose absence is definitive of experiences like Pollan's*. Even if there is some metaphysical fact that the experience was “given to *him*” – the objective subject – the single feature that makes the experience unutterably strange is that it was “given”¹³ *in a distinctly non-first-personal way*. Similar points apply to the claim that “the ‘me’ of for-me-ness is not in the first instance an aspect of *what* is experienced but of *how* it is experienced” (Zahavi & Kriegel, 2015, p. 38). The unusual *what* of Pollan's experience is the void; the unusual *how* is the total absence of an apparent entity or perspective to which this void is manifest. As Z&K say, it is significant that thought insertion is naturally described in terms of alienated *self-consciousness*. It is equally significant that Pollan's experience is not.

Pollan's description speaks to a fundamental point about self-representation:

¹³The scare quotes here are intended to indicate that I do not accept the antecedent; I do not think there is any real sense in which experiences are *given*. For them to be given, there must be *someone* to whom they are given – but as we will see in the next section, I think there is no such entity. I think that our deep-seated intuition that experiences are “given” is simply an artefact of a mental modelling process – a result of the fact that, in virtually all experiences, the brain represents the existence of an entity *to whom* the experience is happening. Of course I accept that experiences happen spatially within organisms, but this is not the same as accepting that they are *given* to an experiencing subject in the relevant sense.

that the self is modelled by the brain as a knowing subject, an entity that represents – and thus potentially misrepresents – a distinct world. This is why it is significant that Pollan says “[this] was not a hallucination”, on the grounds that a hallucination requires “an entity and a point of reference”. To *experience* a mental state as a hallucination requires the sense of an entity standing in representational and epistemic relations of truth and error, accuracy and inaccuracy, to a world external to itself – what Metzinger (2003) calls the “Phenomenal Model of the Intentionality Relation” (PMIR). Pollan’s denial that his experience was hallucinatory is of a piece with the “noetic quality” – the sense of immediate, direct, undeniable knowledge that is a hallmark of (psychedelic) mystical experiences – in that both can be explained by the absence of the phenomenal self-model (PSM) and concomitant PMIR. It is precisely because Pollan’s experience lacks the basic, near-ubiquitous, usually invisible sense of being an experiencing, knowing entity – a “point of reference” – that he cannot conceptualize it as a hallucination. This is strong evidence that his experience lacked the fundamental structure of (apparent) first-personal givenness that characterizes virtually all conscious experiences.

Z&K’s Descriptive Indispensability Argument is intended to refute Absentism about for-me-ness; its conclusion is that for-me-ness really exists (or that we can rationally believe it does irrespective of its explanatory utility.) I accept their argument, insofar as it concerns a purely experiential form of for-me-ness, and have just supplemented it with a further descriptive indispensability argument intended to refute Universalism about experiential for-me-ness. The two arguments, together, establish Typicalism about this phenomenal feature;¹⁴ both Absentism and Universalism leave us unable adequately to describe the full variety of conscious human mentality.

Considerations of phenomenological description lead inexorably, I claim, to Typicalism about non-deflationary (genuinely experiential) for-me-ness. What, then, of explanatory considerations and deflationary (purely metaphysical/epistemic) for-me-ness?

5 Abandoning the access assumption

In their discussion of putative pathological counterexamples to Universalism about for-me-ness, Z&K consider and roundly reject the identification of minimal self-awareness with some purely “geometrical feature” of experience, such as the structure of the visuospatial first-person perspective. Even in pathological cases, they claim, an “experiential perspectival-ness” is retained that goes beyond mere perceptual geometry. Their grounds:

Even in the cases discussed, epistemic asymmetry still obtains: they are available in a special way to the subject in whom they occur. These experiences continue to be characterized by a subjective presence that

¹⁴ Assuming that Universalism, Absentism, and Typicalism are the only options.

makes them utterly unlike public objects, which are accessible in the same way to a plurality of subjects. Regardless of how alienated the patient feels vis-à-vis the experience, the experience [...] continues to be phenomenally present to the patient in a way that is, in principle, unavailable to others. This is part of what its first-personal character amounts to, and why it remains correct to say that the pathological experience retains its for-me-ness. (Zahavi & Kriegel, 2015, p. 45)

The problem with this argument is that Z&K's premises concern a deflationary interpretation of for-me-ness as some purely metaphysical feature, whereas their conclusion concerns a non-deflationary, experiential interpretation. But to assume that the former entails the latter is to beg the question (Guillot, 2017, pp. 34–35). To infer from the relatively uncontroversial fact of epistemic asymmetry (deflationary interpretation) that these pathological experiences are characterized phenomenally by a subjective presence (experiential, non-deflationary interpretation) is to assume that the latter invariably accompanies the former, in the face of counterexamples intended precisely to undermine this generalisation. I do not deny (i) that Pollan is better placed than I am to report on his 5-MeO-DMT experience, nor (ii) that this is so because the experience occurred within him *qua* organism and not within me. What I deny is that, in virtue of these epistemic/metaphysical facts, his experience necessarily featured a *genuinely phenomenal* (non-deflationary) form of for-me-ness – was “given” or structured in a distinctly first-personal way.

Elsewhere, Zahavi expresses puzzlement at the idea that such epistemic asymmetry could obtain without making a phenomenal difference:

This is a somewhat surprising claim. Is it not rather odd to insist that the difference between my access to my own feeling of nausea (as it is subjectively lived through) and the access I have to your feeling of nausea (as it is displayed in your contorted facial expressions and verbal reports) is a difference with no phenomenal impact? Is there not an experiential, i.e. phenomenal, difference between being nauseous oneself and observing somebody else's nausea? (Zahavi, forthcoming, pp. 13–14)

The answer to both rhetorical questions is, of course, yes. It *would* be odd to insist that this difference had no phenomenal impact – but “phenomenal impact” is ambiguous. The fact that my feeling of nausea (N1) is in my brain, and your feeling of nausea (N2) is in your brain, has a phenomenal impact in the following sense: It means that, rather than containing two interoceptive nausea experiences, my total sphere of consciousness contains one interoceptive nausea experience (N1) and one exteroceptive experience of another's behavioural symptoms of nausea (call it B1). This is the experiential difference between being nauseous oneself and observing somebody else's nausea: they are different *experiences*, with different perceptual modalities and representational contents.

However, it is far less clear that this epistemic asymmetry or “difference of access” makes a phenomenal difference in the sense of changing *the experiential*

character of N1 itself. Being in my brain rather than yours does not *as such* make a difference to the phenomenal properties of an experience.¹⁵ So the access differential has a “phenomenal impact” on my total sphere of consciousness: it contains N1 and B1, rather than N1 and N2 (or, etc.) But it does not therefore have a direct phenomenal impact on N1 itself. In short, the metaphysical/epistemic fact that is being described here as “differential access” has a phenomenal impact in the sense that it affects *which experiences somebody has* (and thus “what it is like to be them”); but this does not show that it has a phenomenal impact in the sense of affecting *the character of those experiences themselves.* The latter is required for the claim that for-me-ness shows up in all experience.

My claim here is that prominent defences of Universalism about for-me-ness trade on systematic ambiguities between the deflationary and the non-deflationary interpretations of this term. Faced with compelling arguments against Universalism about the non-deflationary version, its proponents appeal to seemingly undeniable claims about epistemic asymmetry and differential access to support controversial conclusions about the universality of an *experiential* feature. But whether such premises warrant such conclusions is precisely the question at issue.

If I am correct then what follows, at minimum, is that care must be taken to distinguish metaphysical, epistemological, and phenomenological claims in theoretical debates about self, self-awareness, and phenomenal consciousness. That a given mental state possesses a controversial experiential feature cannot be established merely by citing the existence of a relatively uncontroversial metaphysical or epistemic relation, of ownership or access, between a hypothesized subject and that mental state.

At this point a defender of SP may dig in their heels and assert that the weight of evidence and argument favouring this principle outweighs any evidence we might have for a counterexample. This would be analogous to Hume’s argument that belief in miracles *qua* violations of natural law is never warranted, because our evidence for the inviolability of natural laws outweighs any evidence we might have for such a violation. In effect the defender of SP would be rejecting my *modus tollens*:

If SP is true, then there are no states of selfless consciousness.
There are states of selfless consciousness.
Therefore,
SP is not true.

and advancing the *modus ponens*:

If SP is true, then there are no states of selfless consciousness.
SP is true.
Therefore,
There are no states of selfless consciousness.

¹⁵It undoubtedly makes an indirect difference since it means that the experience will co-occur and interact with all the other experiences that I have, which will be different from the set of other experiences that you have.

For this to be plausible, there must be overwhelmingly strong reasons to accept SP – sufficiently strong to outweigh the combination of (a) the lucid and detailed testimony of the psychedelic subjects above and (b) the evidential principles laid out explicitly and implicitly by B&K, which classify these as genuine reports of totally selfless consciousness.

Obviously I cannot engage here with all the evidence and arguments for subjectivity theories and SP. But I will mention one type of consideration that I suspect plays a strong role in motivating a high level of confidence in SP, and indicate briefly why I do not find this consideration persuasive.

Gerard O’Brien and Jon Opie have suggested that the “most tenacious bad idea bedevilling our attempts to think about consciousness [is] the treatment of consciousness as an access relation between cognitive subjects and their own mental states” (O’Brien & Opie, 2015, p. 267). This is the intuition underpinning subjectivity theories: that there are subjects, and there are mental states, and consciousness is what happens when the former access, or become aware, of the latter. This is a metaphysical claim, but it can be seen at work in phenomenological debates, as when Universalists about for-me-ness cite seemingly uncontroversial claims about differential access and epistemic asymmetry as evidence of the exceptionless presence of a phenomenal feature.

However, the deflationary (metaphysical/epistemic) interpretation of for-me-ness is itself ambiguous. What do these claims about differential access and asymmetry really mean? In Zahavi’s nausea case, the most minimal and uncontroversial reading of the differential access claim is that my feeling of nausea, N1, occurs within the brain of this organism rather than another, and thus is especially well-placed to influence information processing in various cognitive subsystems of this organism, such as those specialised for autobiographical memory, introspection, verbal report, and behavioural control. Any influence that N1 can have over the corresponding systems in other organisms must be much less direct. In that sense certain cognitive subsystems of this organism enjoy a kind of “access” to N1 that cognitive subsystems of no other organisms enjoy.

A more substantive and controversial reading of the differential access claim is that there actually exists some entity that can legitimately be described as a self or subject, as *someone* whose mental state N1 is, and who may at various times be aware or unaware of N1, and access or fail to access it. This is a very natural way to speak and it is a very natural way to think. Indeed, it is so natural that it has often been taken to be a necessary or conceptual truth; the idea that there are mental states that are not happening *to* anyone, or experiences that are like something, but not like something *for* anyone, has been alleged to be inconceivable or incoherent. But it is an idea that we need to take seriously in light of evidence from altered states.

This evidence undercuts accusations of inconceivability. It is true that most mentally healthy adult humans are unable to simulate phenomenally, and thus unable to conceive of, a world in which (a) experiences happen, but (b) there is, properly speaking, no one to whom they happen. This is because the vast major-

ity of human conscious experiences feature the subject-object structure of “first-personal givenness” that is experiential for-me-ness. But my psychedelic counterexamples show that it is possible for experiences to lack this phenomenal feature. In light of this, there are two ways of explaining the deep-seated intuition about conscious experiences happening *for* subjects: as a deep and accurate insight into the nature of the mind, or as a mere artefact of an evolved cognitive architecture (Metzinger, 2003).

It will come as no surprise that I prefer the latter hypothesis. In my view, the most parsimonious explanation of the near-universal human belief in the existence of subjects ontically distinct from mental states, but standing to them in relations of ownership, authorship, and access, is an error theory: brains generate mental representations underpinning phenomenal simulations of the existence of such entities as part of an efficient strategy for prediction and control, but those representations are inaccurate insofar as the posited entities do not really exist (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). One reason for thinking that we do, in fact, represent ourselves as entities with such properties is the phenomenal contrast (Siegel, 2007) between ordinary experience and totally selfless experience. Yet another is the ubiquity of the “access assumption” diagnosed by O’Brien and Opie. Even theorists such as Zahavi, who reject the idea of a self ontically distinct from experience, cannot resist using the language of subjects, ontically distinct mental states, and access relations in defending their phenomenological views.

This is not the place for a full-blown defence of the error theory of phenomenal selfhood. For my purposes, it is enough to raise the possibility of such a view. Thus far I have argued that nearly all conscious experiences have, and some conscious experiences lack, experiential for-me-ness: the structural/phenomenal feature of apparent first-personal givenness, which suggests the existence of an entity to whom experiences are given. One way of resisting my conclusion is to appeal to the allegedly overwhelming antecedent plausibility of SP. This apparent plausibility derives in part, I am suggesting, from conceivability considerations: many of us simply cannot imagine a world in which there are no subjects to whom experiences are given, or for whom experiences happen – as distinct from organisms or brains *in which* mental states, spatially, occur. (Of course, the intuition that all experiences have subjects is metaphysical, but we have already seen that metaphysical and phenomenological claims are often conflated in debates over minimal self-awareness.)

For most of us, a world in which experiences simply happen, selflessly, is inconceivable – but this does not entail that such a world is inconceivable *simpliciter*. To grasp the possibility of such a world conceptually, it helps to grasp its contours experientially, and the evidence suggests that this is possible. For theoretical debates concerning self-awareness and consciousness to make progress, we may need to appreciate that the limits of our sober imaginative capacities do not coincide with those of the suitably stimulated human brain (Metzinger, Limanowski, & Millière, 2018).

6 Conclusion

Billon and Kriegel's Subjectivity Principle (SP) holds that "necessarily, a mental state M exhibits phenomenal consciousness only if M exhibits subjectivity" (2015, p. 30). Even if not refuted by thought insertion or DPD, SP is refuted by certain psychedelic states which (i) possess all the features necessary for a verdict of total selflessness but (ii) lack any features sufficient for a denial of phenomenal consciousness. The Universalist Objection to my argument denies premise (i), alleging that my counterexamples may refute Universalism about me-ness and mineness but not about for-me-ness. But this objection faces a dilemma: on a non-deflationary construal of for-me-ness, my counterexamples do refute Universalism, and on a deflationary construal, Universalism is irrelevant to questions of self-consciousness, and dubitable on independent grounds.

Prominent defences of Universalism appeal to descriptive considerations which cut both ways: to the extent that we need an experiential notion of for-me-ness to describe ordinary experience, we need its negation to describe extraordinary experience. Moreover, the existence of an epistemic asymmetry or metaphysical access relation does not, on its own, establish the presence of a genuinely phenomenal form of for-me-ness. The psychedelic cases described here show that the apparent first-personal givenness of experience may be an overwhelmingly common, but is not an invariable, feature of the structure of phenomenal consciousness. And conceivability arguments for SP are undercut by evidence that in certain altered states, the human brain can generate vivid phenomenal simulations of a world in which experiences happen to no-one.

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