

KENNETH WILLIFORD

Moore, the Diaphanousness of Consciousness, and Physicalism*

I. Introductory

In his seminal 1904 statement of neutral monism, “Does Consciousness Exist?”¹ William James quoted a passage from G. E. Moore’s 1903 “The Refutation of Idealism”² in order to give an example of yet another thinker who “...suppose[s]...one to have an immediate consciousness of consciousness itself.”³ The famous sentences James reproduced are still worthy of reproduction:

...[T]he moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see *what*, distinctly, it is, it seems to vanish: it seems as if we had before us a mere emptiness. When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element is as if it were diaphanous. Yet it *can* be distinguished if we look attentively enough, and if we know that there is something to look for.⁴

With Moore’s assertions in his scope, James remarked, “I believe that ‘consciousness,’ when once it has evaporated to this estate of pure

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¹ Reprinted in James 1912: 1-38.

² Reprinted in Moore 1965: 1-30.

³ James 1912: 6.

⁴ Moore 1965: 25.

diaphaneity, is on the point of disappearing altogether. It is the name of a nonentity.... Those who still cling to it are clinging to a mere echo, the faint rumor left behind by the disappearing ‘soul’ upon the air of philosophy.”⁵

I would maintain, however, that Moore was correct to insist upon the diaphanousness of consciousness *as well as* its phenomenological distinguishability vis-à-vis its typical objects, whether or not this conflicts with neutral monism, as James seemed to think. Presumably James thought it a difficult idea that consciousness should be reflectively distinguishable yet diaphanous. But, as we will see, via a discussion of Moore, this diaphanousness extends only to certain properties. I will offer a description of the central features of Moore’s characterization of consciousness in “The Refutation of Idealism” and in his little-known 1910 “The Subject-Matter of Psychology” and then go on to consider critically some of its implications.⁶

⁵ James 1912: 2. It is a curious fact that in his 1890 *Principles of Psychology* James championed the very idea he is here criticizing in Moore. See James 1918: 185, “The word introspection need hardly be defined—it means, of course, the looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover. *Every one agrees that we there discover states of consciousness.* So far as I know, the existence of such states has never been doubted by any critic, however skeptical in other respects he may have been. That we have *cogitations* of some sort is the *inconcussum* in a world most of whose other facts have at some time tottered in the breath of philosophic doubt. All people unhesitatingly believe that they feel themselves thinking, and that they distinguish the mental state as an inward activity or passion, from all the objects with which it may cognitively deal. *I regard this belief as the most fundamental of all the postulates of Psychology*, and shall discard all curious inquiries about its certainty as too metaphysical for the scope of this book.” Emphasis in the original. I regard the *Principles* as the high point of James’s philosophical career.

⁶ This discussion is not intended to be a complete account of Moore’s views in their historical context. I am here primarily interested in certain philosophical points highlighted by some of Moore’s remarks. Given the importance of the problem of the diaphanousness of consciousness in contemporary philosophy of mind, this emphasis is justified. Moreover, a discussion of Moore’s unjustly neglected “The Subject-Matter of Psychology” might inspire someone to undertake an adequate, historically sensitive investigation of Moore’s views in this regard.

II. *Diaphanousness, Externalism, and the Subject of Consciousness*

II.1 *Externalism and Diaphanousness*

By ‘externalism’ I mean ‘content externalism’ in one of its contemporary senses. What are now called externalist theories of content correspond, in a certain way, to what were once called *object* (as opposed to *content*) theories of intentionality; for, according to the theories picked out by both terms, the *metaphysical* individuation conditions for an intentional state or act⁷ make ineliminable reference to objects that are not themselves identical to nor, strictly speaking, parts or properties of the intentional state or act in question (with the possible exception of self-referential states or acts). Externalists, like object theorists, do not think that intentional states or acts can be *metaphysically* individuated apart from their relation to what they are *of* and thus, typically, what they are *not*. Internalists, like content theorists (in the more narrow, older sense of ‘content’), think they can be so individuated, though only in principle.⁸ The terminological shift (whereby the very word ‘content’ has come to be neutral with respect to internalist and externalist theories), I suggest, was a consequence of the shift away from theories of the intentionality of *consciousness* and toward theories that begin (and sometimes end) with non-conscious content.⁹

If one does not keep this terminological development in mind, one will no doubt balk when I assert, as I am now, that G. E. Moore was a content externalist. One will only so balk if one is tempted to define the

⁷ I am fully comfortable with neither term, but here prefer ‘act.’ Also given the subject matter of this paper it makes more sense to use ‘act.’

⁸ For similar characterizations of the internalism/externalism distinction (in the theory of content), see McGinn 1989: 1-117 and McCulloch 1995: 184-224. McGinn’s discussion, in particular, is of very high quality. For a different and important discussion of the distinction see Fumerton 2003: 259-265. It is more common to characterize the distinction in terms of “supervenience” conditions instead of individuation conditions, but the characterizations are equivalent. On the impossibility (in practice) of individuating contentful states in this way, cf. Fodor on the “radical inexpressibility” of narrow content, Fodor 1987: 50.

⁹ See Williford ms. for arguments to this effect.

internalism/externalism controversy in the theory of content by reference to notions like consciousness or direct acquaintance.¹⁰ On the definition of the controversy advocated here, it is controversy about the metaphysical (and not epistemological) individuation conditions for an intentional state or act. As such, the internalist/externalist distinction cuts across the conscious/unconscious divide and is neutral, at least definitionally, with respect to any doctrine about epistemic access to content.

G. E. Moore's leaning toward content externalism (in the sense just defined) is clear enough in his sadly neglected 1910 paper, "The Subject-Matter of Psychology." He writes:

The first...[way in which acts of consciousness can differ from one another] is the difference which merely consists in the fact that one act of consciousness is a consciousness *of* one entity, where as another act of consciousness is a consciousness *of* a different entity. For instance, when I see a blue colour, I am conscious of a different entity from that of which I am conscious when I see a red one. And my seeing of the red certainly does differ from my seeing of the blue, in respect of the fact that whereas the one is a consciousness of the red, the other is a consciousness of the blue: the mere fact that one is of the red and the other of the blue *is* a difference between them. ...[T]he two acts certainly differ in respect to the fact that one is *of* the one entity and the other *of* the other, whether they also differ in other respects or not. There is no kind of difference between mental acts more universal than this. We are all of us, in the course of our lives, conscious of millions of different entities, and our consciousness of each differs from our consciousness of all the rest, in respect of the fact that it is a consciousness *of* the entity of which it is, and not of any other different entity. But this kind of difference does not seem to me to be *itself* a mental difference.¹¹

No content internalist would deny that intentional acts or states that are about different objects therefore differ from one another. But their view is that it is an internal difference in the act that determines that an act be about one object as opposed to another, even though that difference is unspecifiable *in practice* without making reference to an object. Moore is here suggesting that it is the other way around, that the typically *non-mental* differences among objects determine the differences between acts. As far as the *phenomenology* is concerned, consciousness, as it appears in

¹⁰ See, for example, Fumerton 2003.

¹¹ Moore 1910: 46-47.

different acts is always diaphanous; the only introspectively detectable differences among acts are differences of object (bracketing now differences of “attitude,” e.g., desire, belief.)¹²

Lest there be any doubt about this interpretation of Moore’s words, consider his doubtful remarks about a necessary component of “content” (internalist) theories:

...[T]he second sort of difference, which there might be between mental acts, *would*, if there were such a difference, undoubtedly be a mental one; only I am not sure that there is any such difference.... It seems, namely, to be held by some philosophers that any mental act which differs from another in respect of the fact that whereas one is the consciousness *of* one entity, the other is a consciousness *of* a different entity, must or does always *also* differ from the other in some *other* respect—in some *internal* respect: that wherever there is that difference of relation, which consists in the fact that two mental acts have different *objects*, there must also be some other *qualitative* difference between the two—beside the difference of *objects*, *also* a difference of “*content*.”¹³

Moore is not sure that there are such internal (he says “mental”) differences, differences in intrinsic quality, between acts of consciousness because there seem to be no phenomenological considerations in support of this.¹⁴ He writes, “My *consciousness* of [different objects] seems to me to be exactly the same in its nature. And so, too, when I think of St. Paul’s Cathedral, or think of the Crystal Palace, all that I am able to be certain of is that, in the two cases, I am conscious of different entities—not that, in

¹² Moore considers these to be mental differences internal to the act. See Moore 1910: 48-51.

¹³ Moore 1910: 48.

¹⁴ Addis (1989: 51-56) seems to regard the difference in object, a difference that is phenomenologically evident, *just as* a difference in an intrinsic, monadic property of the act. But one might argue that this is to *interpret* the relevant phenomenological data in terms of concepts arrived at through dialectical considerations. And if so, then there is here no genuinely *phenomenological* appeal in support of the theory. As far as the phenomenology is concerned, we are given only differences of object (and mode or attitude). One must *infer* that these given differences correlate with differences of intrinsic property.

each case, my consciousness has a further difference—a difference of quality.”¹⁵

It should be noted that Moore is not here considering theories according to which the contentfulness of an act *consists in* its having some intrinsic property or other, he is only considering whether acts must have such an internal difference *in addition* to their having different objects. As such he is only doubting a necessary *component* of an internalist theory.

But Moore is well aware that there are *dialectical* (as opposed to purely phenomenological) considerations that could reasonably lead one to adopt some form of content internalism. Considering the fact that thoughts of different objects can lead to different effects, whether or not the objects of the thoughts exist, Moore concludes that “...it cannot be the different objects which produce the different effects; and therefore there seems to me some force in the argument that there must be some internal difference in my consciousness of the one and of the other, although I can discover none.”¹⁶ Note that the argument Moore considers leaves open the question whether the feature in virtue of which different acts of consciousness have different effects is identical to the feature in virtue of which they are of different objects. For the argument to favor internalism, one must make this identification.¹⁷

The important point, however, is that one must *argue* that acts of consciousness have this intrinsic feature. As far as the *phenomenology* is concerned, consciousness itself seems to be the same across acts; there seem to be no internal differences between acts of consciousness *qua* acts of *consciousness*. An act does indeed *not seem* to be any of the objects it is of, but it does not seem to have any phenomenologically discernible intrinsic properties of its own (save perhaps attitudinal properties).

¹⁵ Moore 1910: 55.

¹⁶ Moore 1910: 56.

¹⁷ There are, of course, good reasons for making this identification. If one is a realist about folk-psychological explanation, then one will certainly want it to be the case that a difference in narrow content can, in some cases, be *the only relevant* difference in a given folk-psychological explanation of behavior. One will either have to identify the narrow content with the causally relevant feature or *postulate* an internal feature that is systematically correlated with the narrow content and that is causally responsible for the behavioral difference. The latter move is, of course, theoretically inelegant.

Finally, it ought to be added that the argument of “The Refutation of Idealism” simply will not work without the thesis of content externalism. The following famous passage includes an unequivocal statement of the doctrine:

...[W]henever I have a mere sensation or idea, the fact is that I am then aware of something which is equally and in the same sense *not* an inseparable aspect of my experience. The awareness which I have maintained to be included in sensation is the very same unique fact which constitutes every kind of knowledge: “blue” is as much an object, and as little a mere content, of my experience, when I experience it, as the most exalted and independent real thing of which I am ever aware. There is, therefore, no question of how we are to “get outside the circle of our own ideas and sensations.” Merely to have a sensation is already to *be* outside that circle. It is to know something which is as truly and really *not* part of *my* experience, as anything which I can ever know....¹⁸

This passage implies that (once again, excluding self-referential cases) having an awareness of *x* *consists in* one’s having an act intentionally related to *x* where *x* is not (or need not be) a property or part of consciousness and is not itself *that awareness*. Without this premise, there can be no move from the having of an awareness to the existence of something other than that awareness. And without that move, the famous argument of “The Refutation of Idealism” fails.

Notice that the phenomenological diaphanousness of consciousness is crucial here. Consciousness *as such* is the same in all of its acts; the objects of consciousness differ. Consciousness reveals to itself no internal or intrinsic properties whereby it is *of* one object as opposed to another; all the difference seems to be solely a matter of the object. When one focuses on the consciousness involved in each different act, one sees the self-same diaphanousness.¹⁹ Because consciousness as such remains the same as its objects vary and is distinguishable from each of them, consciousness cannot be identified with any of those objects. Therefore, consciousness, by its very nature, reveals *what it is not*. Therefore, something *other than*

¹⁸ Moore 1965: 27.

¹⁹ Cf. Moore 1910: 57, “...the fact that I am conscious of one object...is certainly always different from the fact that I am conscious of another object, even though my consciousness of the one may be exactly similar, internally, to my consciousness of the other.”

consciousness must exist, and this is the very condition for there being any consciousness at all. Or, at least, so the argument goes.²⁰ The point to note for the present purposes is that without the claim that consciousness is phenomenologically diaphanous, the content externalism needed for the main argument of “The Refutation” is put into question.²¹

II.2 Diaphanousness and the Subject of Consciousness

Moore’s project in “The Subject-Matter” was, in a reasonable sense, an anglophone version of Brentano’s project in Book II, Chapter 1 of his 1874 *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkte*, the famous chapter entitled (in translation of course) “The Distinction between Mental and Physical Phenomena.”²² (This was, to be sure, no accident.)²³ Like Brentano, Moore was attempting to determine what things among all the objects of our knowledge are properly called mental. Also like Brentano, Moore concludes that conscious, intentional acts are paradigmatically mental. But what about the self that supposedly has or is the subject of those acts? Is that subject of consciousness properly called mental as well? Moore writes:

²⁰ The “ontological proof” of Sartre’s introduction to *Being and Nothingness* is essentially the same as Moore’s argument in “The Refutation,” as Butchvarov has pointed out. See Butchvarov 1979: 248-255 and 1998: chapters 1-2. See Sartre 1956: xlv-lxvii.

²¹ In the preface to his 1922 collection, *Philosophical Studies*, Moore said of “The Refutation,” “This paper now appears to me to be very confused, as well as to embody a good many down-right mistakes...” (Moore 1965: viii). This has led some to wonder if the claim that consciousness is diaphanous might be one of the mistakes. For what it is worth, I think that the main “mistake” has to do with Moore’s inference from the presence of sense-data to consciousness to the claim that something non-mental in fact exists. Moore always held that sense-data are *possibly* non-mental, but in order to genuinely refute idealism, Moore needed to be able to infer that they are *in fact* non-mental. Securing their distinctness from consciousness itself is not sufficient to secure the claim that they are non-mental. I surmise that Moore recognized this. See Butchvarov 1998: 24-25 and 163.

²² Brentano 1995: 77-100.

²³ Moore was familiar with Brentano’s work and with much of the work of the “Brentano School,” see, e.g., Künne 1990.

What I do doubt about, in the case of my mind, is what sort of an entity it is: in particular, whether it is an entity of one of the kinds which I have already described [viz. acts, attitudinal properties of acts, and unified series of acts]; or whether it is a new kind of entity different from any of these, and which is also “mental” in a different sense from that in which any of them are “mental.”

...I am, in fact, much more sure that there are such things as my mental acts, than that there is any entity distinct from these, which could be called my mind. And if...[Hume’s] view *were* a true one, if my mind does consist merely in the sum of my mental acts, it would, of course, merely be an instance of the third kind of entity, which I recognised as undoubtedly mental: it would be a collection of acts of consciousness, having some kind of unity.

In favor of this [Humean] view I have to urge the difficulty that I find in discovering any entity, other than my mental acts, which could be my mind.²⁴

Moore points out that the Humean view of the self has two important problems: when we attribute mental states to ourselves we do not seem to *mean* that those states are parts of a certain bundle of acts, and, given Humean philosophical resources, there seems to be no way to rule out what we might call anomalous bundles or selves; that is, if the bundling involved is something as weak as mereological summation, then there would seem to be no restriction on bundling what we would normally call “my” acts with what we would normally call “yours,” thus making at least three selves out of two.²⁵

The conclusion about the subject of consciousness to which Moore comes deserves careful consideration. He writes:

I think, therefore, there is something to be said for the view that *I* am an entity, distinct from every one of my mental acts and from all of them put together: an entity, whose acts they are; which is that which is conscious when I am conscious; and that what I mean by calling them all “mine,” is that they all of them are acts of this same entity. But even if I am such an entity, it does not follow that it is a mental entity. There is still another hypothesis, against which I can find no conclusive arguments: namely, that this entity which hears and sees and feels and thinks is some part of *my body*. I cannot see anything conclusive against Locke’s view that matter may be capable of being conscious; and hence that it may be my body which is conscious whenever I am conscious. If this were so, then, I should say we could not identify my self with “my

²⁴ Moore 1910: 52. See also Moore 1959: 46-52.

²⁵ Moore 1910: 53-54.

mind.” I myself should not, then, be a mental entity: I should be my body. Whereas anything that is properly to be called “my mind” must, I think, be allowed to be “mental.” But we might combine this view with Hume’s view by saying that “my mind” was the collection of my mental acts; and that what made them all “mine” was not any direct relation they had to one another, but the fact that they all had a common relation to my body.

The view, therefore, that “my mind” is a mental entity, distinct from any one of my mental acts and from all of them, seems to me to be only one among several possible alternatives....²⁶

Though Moore very briefly considers the possibility that the subject of consciousness might be, in a special sense of ‘mental,’ a mental entity (i.e., he says “...something, *not* the body, *of* which certain mental acts were the acts....” e.g., a Cartesian thinking substance),²⁷ the very fact that he allows that it might be the body or some part of the body that is conscious whenever one is conscious is important. It is important because it means that Moore recognized that the nature or ontological status of the *subject* of consciousness is *not* phenomenologically given and therefore cannot be decided on those grounds.

Also quite telling is Moore’s claim that if the subject of consciousness is something non-physical, then the sense in which it is mental is quite different from the sense in which acts of consciousness are mental. This indicates Moore’s appreciation of the following point: if an act is called mental only because it is *of* something, then we cannot call the subject of consciousness mental in *that* sense. It is not that which has a certain act that is *of* an object. The act of consciousness is what is constitutively *of* the object. The subject has the act. If one identifies the subject with what is *of* some object, then, because the identity of an act varies with its object, one is left with, at best, a Humean self. Moore has told us that consciousness *as such* does not vary across acts, but this then can only be interpreted to mean that it is the *ofness* relation itself that remains invariant. When one focuses on that relation (supposing that to be what it is), one finds only diaphanousness; one does not find that the relation is a self or is the subject of consciousness. Thus if the self is *mental*, it is not to be so called because it is *of* anything.

²⁶ Moore 1910: 54.

²⁷ Moore 1910: 55.

Because consciousness is not to be identified with the subject or self, and because consciousness is phenomenologically silent about the nature of the self, Moore maintains that, as far as we can tell, the self might be something physical; and if it is something mental, it is so in a sense quite distinct from that in which acts are properly called mental.

III. Implications

III.1 Externalism

Moore was well aware that the relational, act/object analysis of consciousness faces the problem of non-existent objects. How can an act be or bear a relation to something that does not exist? This worry was a motive for adopting certain versions of the internalist theory of content. The hope was that by adopting such a theory one would not only secure the intrinsic differences between acts needed to explain their casual differences, but one would also avoid postulating a relation that relates something existent to something non-existent. On the internalist view of the kind here in question acts differ because they have different *monadic* intentional properties, properties that are, by their very nature, *about* something. But is this move a great theoretical improvement over a more Moorean view? I am not so sure.

If, according to the view, acts are intentional not because they themselves are *about* their objects but because they have special intentional properties that are *about* objects, then they effectively admit a version of externalism; it does not help to postulate the intrinsic property and then to hold that the metaphysical individuation conditions of the property are essentially relational. That is simply to relocate one's externalism.²⁸

²⁸ If one thinks it is better to say that it then only *would be about* such an object, then so be it; that is merely a reaffirmation of the fact that what the thought is about does not exist. Moreover, the counterfactual thought itself must be understood to be *really about* the non-existent object that, it says, the initial thought would be about were the object to exist. Were this not the case, then the counterfactual would not be able to do the theoretical work it is supposed to do. And let us not forget that understanding counterfactuals involves understanding what is *not* the case. Going counterfactual only relocates the original difficulty: how do we think about what is *not*? See, e.g., Addis 1989.

The internalist is faced with a serious problem. Internalists (of the sort in question) do believe the following claim: *Necessarily*, if the object of a contentful state or act does in fact exist, then a special relation (the “intentional connection” according to Addis, and a relation of “correspondence” according to Fumerton) obtains between the act or state and the object.²⁹ If the object does not exist, then the relation does not obtain, though the act or state will still *have the capacity* to bear that relation to the relevant object (existent or not).

From solely the logical form of their claim, one cannot see what grounds the necessity involved here. Consider:

$$(\exists x)(Px) \ \& \ (\exists y)(Sy) \ . \supset \ . \ (\exists x) (\exists y)(x \ R \ y)$$

Let us suppose that x is the thought that p and that y is the state of affairs the obtaining of which p asserts. Let R be the “aboutness” or “correspondence” relation. It may indeed be correct to claim that this conditional is necessarily true, but the logical form of the claim is not by itself sufficient to indicate this. One can easily construct counter-examples to show this.

But we can rule out the claim that the relation (again, given the existence of the relevant contentful act or state and the relevant object or state of affairs) obtains only contingently. If that were so, then, for all we know, the *thought* that grass is green might not correspond to the *fact* that grass is green. It might correspond to something else, and then we would not know the contents of our own thoughts. Or it might correspond to nothing at all. Or it might correspond some of the time and fail to at other times. The same considerations apply, *mutatis mutandis*, if one construes contentful states in a *de re* mode. If we allow that the relation, when it obtains, obtains only contingently, then, one is tempted to maintain, whatever the relation might be, it is not that of “aboutness” or “correspondence.”

²⁹ See Addis 1989: 95-122 and Fumerton 2003: 257-265. I will speak loosely of a contentful state, act, or thought being “about” or “corresponding to” an object or state of affairs. Addis, unlike Fumerton, allows for genuinely *de re* intentional states; Fumerton reduces all intentional contents to propositional or *de dicto* contents and reduces all intentionality to “correspondence” or the *capacity* to correspond (supposing the relevant state of affairs not to obtain). The points I make will hold on either version of internalism. In the background here is the work of Gustav Bergmann on intentionality, see, e.g., Bergmann 1959: 3-38 and 1964: 3-44 and 85-97.

If the relation, given the thought and the state of affairs (or act and object) it relates, must obtain, then we still want to know what it is in virtue of which this is the case. Presumably, one will have to hold that it is an *essential* feature of the contentful state or act that it have this capacity to correspond to (or be about) precisely the state of affairs (or object) in question. But then this implies that the identity of the state or act is, in part, defined by a relation (even if only a potential relation) to its object and typically to something it is *not*. And this, again, is simply the core thesis of *externalism*. The internalist faces a trilemma: either admit that the “aboutness” or “correspondence” relation holds only contingently, or admit that the relation they have defined has nothing to do with intentionality, or embrace the core thesis of externalism.

The important lesson here is that one cannot avoid the ontological problems posed by the nature of intentional states simply by identifying intentional states with monadic properties of the mind. As Moore points out in “The Refutation,” even if an act of consciousness presenting something phenomenally blue is itself phenomenally blue, this in no way explains how the blueness is presented.³⁰ More generally, property exemplification is not by itself the right relation in terms of which one can understand the conscious presentation of something.³¹ At the very best,

³⁰ Moore 1965: 26, “Whether or not, when I have the sensation of blue, my consciousness or awareness is thus blue, my introspection does not enable me to decide with certainty: I only see no reason for thinking that it is. But whether it is or not, the point is unimportant, for introspection *does* enable me to decide that something else is also true: namely that I am aware *of* blue, and by this I mean, that my awareness has to blue a quite different and distinct relation. It is possible, I admit, that my awareness is blue *as well* as being *of* blue: but what I am quite sure of is that it is *of* blue....”

³¹ Notice that this counts as well as a criticism of any view according to which consciousness is to be regarded as a monadic property of its objects. (See Butchvarov 1979: 248-255 and 1998: 35-55.) Whether the objects of consciousness are properties exemplified by it or consciousness is a property exemplified by its objects, the relation of property exemplification is, by itself, insufficient to explain *presence of ___ to ___*. There is some sense to be made of the fact that different philosophers have been tempted to treat qualia as intrinsic properties of consciousness, on the one hand, and consciousness as a property of its objects, on the other. Both views are equally plausible, given the phenomenology. If one wishes to reduce qualia to properties of consciousness, then it will not be clear how to avoid doing the same for the intentional objects of consciousness (at least if we are to respect the phenomenology); we will then be led to something like Berkeley’s or (perhaps) Husserl’s idealism. On the other

one would have to posit a very special class of properties that consciousness exemplifies, and one would have to regard these as primitive. That is, one would have to say that somehow by being phenomenally blue an act of consciousness comes to have something phenomenally blue presented as its object. This would be a postulation, not an explanation of anything. And when it comes to objects more complicated than phenomenal colors, it becomes hard to see how this account is coherent at all. It is hard to imagine how one could become conscious of a table, say, by literally exemplifying tablehood, even if only formally, as on an Aristotelian sort of view. Here one might tell a different story and restrict the properties literally exemplified to simple qualitative ones. But phenomenologically, in any case, the *presentation* (as such) of a table is not different from the *presentation* of blueness; there seems, phenomenologically, to be only a difference in object. And even if we allow that there is a non-phenomenological difference, on the strength of dialectical considerations, the original point holds: exemplification by itself is not an explanatory relation in this regard. If one posits that this is a special sort of exemplification or the exemplification of a special sort of property, the kind of property that somehow includes an awareness of the

hand, if one wants to give qualia (and the self) the same status as intentional objects, and is, in one way or another, an externalist about these objects, then consciousness will appear to be nothing more than a bare revealing (to no one but perhaps to itself) of these objects. Then consciousness will be conceivable as something like a monadic property of these objects. In both cases there is no explanation of presence; property exemplification is too generic a relation to do any explanatory work, no matter what we take to be exemplifying what. Nevertheless, I should note that there is an important grain of truth in the idea that consciousness is like a monadic property of its objects. Acts of consciousness *are like* properties in the Fregean sense; they are, in their nature, *unsaturated*. The specification of their objects is *something like* the specification of the particular that it would take to “saturate” a certain property. Acts of consciousness have a nature that is like the predicative nature of properties. This is, in fact, just another way to state the externalist thesis. On the Fregean view properties are by their very nature unsaturated; speaking loosely, in virtue of their essential structure they “make reference to” the objects that might exemplify them. Likewise, consciousness, by its very nature, “makes reference to” the objects it is of. Just as forgetting about the predicative nature of properties can lead one to conceptual and ontological mistakes (at least if Frege is to be believed), so too, forgetting about the inherently relational nature of consciousness can lead one to mistakes. To my knowledge Johannes Daubert (though not mentioning Frege, of course) was the first to make something like this important point. See Schuhmann and Smith 1985: 769-773.

property, one effectively admits that exemplification alone is not an illuminating relation to posit here.

I should add that the argument that there must be some difference on the side of consciousness if different thoughts are to have different causal consequences and thoughts about non-existents are to have any at all, is in fact already taken care of by the externalist view. Remember, the view is that the very identity of an act is a function of what it is about. Sometimes what it is about does not exist. One can think about many *different* non-existents (Don Quixote, mermaids, canals on Mars, etc.) as well as many different existents. The difference in object determines the difference in act; this determination of difference *is not causal*; it is constitutive. Non-existent objects cause nothing, but different, real acts have different effects, even though the difference between acts is not in the first instance a causal difference—though in the case of veridical *perceptual* consciousness I do not deny that there is a causal component. The differences among acts are real and are a function of the difference in object, but they are not *caused by* the differences between objects. If one likes, the determining difference in object is like a structural or formal feature of the act. It is not that the object somehow reaches into the act and causes it to be different from others; it is that the structure of the act is such that only such-and-such an object could “fit” it, to use a common metaphor. One thus cannot specify what the act fits or would fit, without making reference to the object. A very condition of its being the act it is is that it fit only just such an object. In this sense, the relation (even if only potential) to a specific object is metaphysically essential to the individuation of the act. That an act is *of* this or that object is the very feature that makes it a different act and thus enables it to have different causal consequences. These real differences between acts are enough to secure that they have different effects.³²

³² Moore (1910: 56) is close to the response I have made on his behalf to the causal difference argument when he writes, “But there does seem to me to be one possible alternative [to the content theory]: namely, that in each case is it neither my consciousness of the object, nor the object itself, which produces the effect, but the whole fact—the fact that I am conscious of the object. This fact—the whole fact—is, it seems to me, certainly a different entity both from the object, and from my consciousness of it, if we mean by the latter merely what I have hitherto meant—namely, what is left over when we subtract the object from the whole fact.” To be sure, acts with different causal consequences must be acts that are different, but the difference that consists in one being of one object and another being of another seems

The internalist view sketched above is not clearly a theoretical *improvement* over Moore's, but this is not to say that I think Moore's own view, as a piece of *ontology*, is obviously superior. As a piece of *phenomenology* I think it surely is. Moore lucidly recognizes 1) that difference of act *seems to be* parasitic upon difference of *object* and not upon any discernible difference of intrinsic property, and 2) that consciousness seems to be the selfsame diaphanousness across acts. So, from act to act something changes (the object) and something remains the same (consciousness as such). This seems to me to be a correct phenomenological description. But what about the ontology? Here, unfortunately, I have no positive ontology of intentionality to offer. But for my purposes, Moore's phenomenological considerations will be enough.

III.2 Physicalism and the Diaphanousness of Consciousness

In "The Refutation of Idealism" Moore says:

...[I]t is hardly likely that if philosophers had clearly distinguished in the past between a sensation or idea and what I have called its object, there should have been no separate name for the latter. They have always used the same name for these two different "things" (if I may call them so): and hence there is some probability that they have supposed these "things" *not* to be two and different, but one and the same. And, secondly, there is very good reason why they should have supposed so, in the fact that when we refer to introspection and try to discover what the sensation of blue is, it is very easy to suppose that we have before us only a single term. The term "blue" is easy enough to distinguish, but the other element which I have called "consciousness"—that which sensation of blue has in common with sensation of green—is extremely difficult to fix. That many people fail to distinguish it at all is sufficiently shown by the fact that there are materialists. And, in general, that which makes the sensation of blue a mental fact seems to escape us: it seems, if I may use a metaphor, to be transparent—we look through it and see nothing but the blue; we may be

to be sufficient for this. Only if one makes the mistake of thinking that the externalist view is committed to it being the object that *causes* a difference in act and thereby different psychological effects will one think that this argument cuts against externalism. It is the "whole fact" as Moore here says that determines one act to be different from another and thus for them to have different effects.

convinced that there *is something* but *what* it is no philosopher, I think, has yet clearly recognised....³³

Moore is correct, I think, that consciousness is phenomenologically diaphanous: one is aware of the objects and their qualities; there seems to be nothing literally in consciousness or behind it, and nothing between it and its objects. Still, it is distinguishable. The consciousness of an object is not (typically) the object of that consciousness.

But Moore's remark about materialists is wrongheaded. Consciousness does not reveal itself to be anything other than an empty revealing of objects and a revealing of that revealing. But this does not mean that consciousness reveals itself to be *non-identical* to all of its objects, though it does mean that one cannot determine the ontology of consciousness is simply by doing phenomenology. Only if one makes the mistake of thinking that if consciousness does not seem to itself to be something, then it is not, can one accept Moore's easy dismissal of materialism.

The upshot of the thesis of the diaphanousness of consciousness is simply this: consciousness is silent about its substance, about what, if any monadic properties it is or has and about what it is not. This does not mean that consciousness is an unreliable guide to its intentionality and other positive characteristics, but it does mean that its silence with regard to other features cannot be treated as a perfectly general denial that it has them. True, consciousness does not obviously seem to be physical, but that is because it does not seem to be anything other than a certain diaphanous revealing of objects and a revealing of that revealing. And it is a perfectly open question whether a revealing of objects could be physical or not.

Moore's main mistake here, so far as I can see, is to couple the thesis of diaphanousness with, at least implicitly in this passage, the thesis of strong transparency.³⁴ As I define this thesis, is it the claim that if consciousness has a property it can seem to itself to have the property upon

³³ Moore 1965: 20.

³⁴ It is clear that Moore did not, or did not consistently, hold that consciousness can come to be aware of all of its properties via introspection. See, e.g., Moore 1965: 26 where he denies that, for a certain class of properties, one can tell by introspection whether or not consciousness has the properties. NB: Despite their typical English meanings, I am using the words 'diaphanous' and 'transparent' to mean distinct things.

introspection. That is, introspection, according to strong transparency, can reveal all of the properties consciousness has. This is not to be confused with the claim that consciousness has the properties it does seem to have upon introspection. We could call that weak transparency. It merely says that if consciousness seems to have a characteristic upon introspection, then it does. Strong transparency is the converse of weak transparency and is the stronger claim that consciousness has no properties that it cannot seem to have upon reflection. It says that if consciousness has a characteristic, then introspection can reveal it.

Moore was clear that consciousness does not *seem* to have any intrinsic “content” properties, that it does not *seem* to be material or anything else, and that consciousness is silent regarding its subject. His only mistake, so far as I can see, is to embrace strong transparency, at least some of the time. It is not at all philosophically irrelevant to point out that Sartre’s view of consciousness up through *Being and Nothingness* was very similar to Moore’s. In fact there is an argument in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness* that is, in substance, very much like the main argument in Moore’s “Refutation.”³⁵ *Being and Nothingness* can be viewed (in part) as an exercise in taking the diaphanousness thesis coupled with the strong transparency thesis to its logical conclusion. Consciousness does not seem to be anything substantial, therefore, Sartre concluded, it is not anything substantial; it is a Nothingness. I submit that Moore and Sartre were quite right about the diaphanousness thesis; consciousness does seem like an emptiness. But they were wrong to embrace strong transparency. It rules out materialism, but it rules out every other kind of substantive theory of consciousness as well. It leads to the view that consciousness is a Nothingness. This is fine as a kind of phenomenological description, but as an ontological theory it is disastrous. It entails directly a very strong, *a priori* form of mysterianism; that is, it implies that, in principle, no *informative* identity statement of the form “consciousness = X” could be true.

The proper alternative, I think, is to reject strong transparency. Consciousness does indeed have properties it does not seem to itself to have. Consciousness, as far as its substance or matter goes, may be identical to something that it does not seem to itself to be. What these properties are and what that matter or substance is we cannot say *a priori*

³⁵ See Sartre 1956: 1x-1xii. I will not attempt to justify these sweeping claims about Sartre here, so the reader may take them *cum grano salis* for now.

nor via conceptual analysis, nor via more introspection. This opens the door to materialism once again (but to substance dualism and perhaps James's neutral monism as well). Such ontological issues cannot be decided on phenomenological grounds alone. We must then seek for another method whereby we may be able to determine theoretically what consciousness *is*. Far from precluding physicalism, then, Moore's doctrine of the phenomenological diaphanousness of consciousness opens a possible route to it, for it shows us that introspection gives us no information inconsistent with physicalism.

IV. Conclusion: The True Significance of Diaphanousness

Moore's claims about the diaphanousness of consciousness have received a steady stream of commentary in the philosophy of mind literature. For the most part these comments have been in the context of the debate over representational theories of phenomenal content according to which phenomenal content is just a species of intentional content and there are no "qualia" *sensu stricto*.³⁶ But I maintain that the true significance of the diaphanousness of consciousness for the philosophy of mind lies elsewhere, though my remarks here will have to be brief.

Philosophers of mind who do not dismiss the phenomenological data also tend to be fond of modal and epistemic arguments for dualism.³⁷ I maintain, but cannot argue here, that the ease with which we can conceive of the existence of zombies and, more generally, the ease with which we can conceive of consciousness as *not* being identical to just about anything one would care to imagine is readily explained by its diaphanousness. Moreover, the explanation of our conceptual powers in this regard is such that it undercuts any inference in this domain from conceivability to possibility and thus from the conceivable non-identity of consciousness

³⁶ In relation to Moore and representational theories of phenomenal content see, e.g., Harman 1990, Shoemaker 1996: 132, Tye 1995: 31 and 220, Tye 2000: 111-112, Leeds 2002, Shoemaker 2002, Tye 2002 (this list is not exhaustive). From some brief discussions of Moore's remarks about diaphanousness in other contemporary philosophy of mind contexts, sometimes resulting in surprising applications, see, e.g., Rosenthal 1986, Metzinger 2000: 298-299 and 303, Metzinger 2003: 163-165, Dainton 2000: 43-44 (Dainton also discusses the passage from James that I quote at the beginning of this paper), and Caston 2002: 782-785.

³⁷ See, e.g., Chalmers 1996.

and (e.g.) a brain process to their possible non-identity (and thus their actual non-identity).

Consciousness does not seem, in the phenomenological sense, to be a brain process, that is true. But neither does it seem to be an immaterial substance, or a divine spark, or a fundamental property of the universe supervening on functional substrates of sufficient complexity, or a particular bit of Schopenhauer's Will. Consciousness is diaphanous with respect to all of these. There are simply no phenomenological data in this regard. Moreover, consciousness is likewise diaphanous with respect to its categorial status: one cannot tell phenomenologically if it is a kind of property (in some robust sense of 'property'), relation, substance, etc. (Perhaps one can tell, due to its manifest temporality, that it is a *process*, but we will leave this to the side.)

If one couples the fact that consciousness is diaphanous with the view that consciousness can reveal to introspection all of its characteristics, then one will quickly draw the inference that consciousness is something ontologically fundamental. As diaphanous, it does not seem to be a brain process. If the thesis of strong transparency holds, then one can infer from this that it is not a brain process. As diaphanous, it does not seem to be a kind of instantiated functional organization, therefore it is not. And so on. What is disconcerting is that the very philosophers who embrace this sort of reasoning (even if the embrace is not a fully self-conscious one), will, after thus "refuting" physicalism, turn around and identify consciousness with things it is equally diaphanous with respect to.

When phenomenological considerations reach their limits, such philosophers typically have no problem with postulating ontologies that clearly go beyond what is given. But the correctness of this kind of procedure presupposes that consciousness is *not* strongly transparent, something we should indeed presuppose. I do indeed agree that consciousness does not seem to itself to be physical. But one cannot conclude from this phenomenological fact (or from the conceptual analyses of consciousness that rest upon this fact) that consciousness is not physical unless one also embraces strong transparency. Thus we often find the same philosophers implicitly denying and embracing the thesis. Philosophers should, of course, be consistent. But there is a dilemma lurking here that some philosophers of mind will not like. Either reject strong transparency and thus admit that there are no compelling *phenomenological* reasons for denying physicalism or accept it and the diaphanousness of consciousness will force one, if one is to remain consistent, to end up with something like

Sartre's "phenomenological" ontology according to which consciousness is a Nothingness. *Tertium datur*, one might say: one could reject the thesis of diaphanousness and hold that some positive ontology of consciousness is given phenomenologically. But surely Moore and Sartre are right that no such ontology is given.

ABSTRACT

I discuss the main features of Moore's characterization of consciousness in his well-known 1903 "The Refutation of Idealism" and his little-known 1910 "The Subject-Matter of Psychology." The presentation is somewhere between an expository exercise in the history of analytical ontology and a philosophical engagement with Moore's interesting claims. Among other things, I argue that Moore's famous thesis of the "diaphanousness" of consciousness cannot, contrary to Moore's own claims, be used to undermine physicalism but in fact can be used to undercut some common arguments against physicalism.

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