

Introspection, the phenomenal character and the self (Draft)

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I. Introduction

For a long time introspection was thought to be the method to get to know our own mental states, especially our own conscious experiences and the existence of the self. Descartes claimed that the knowledge we obtain by introspection is epistemically certain, in contrast to methods of perception. This claim was the basis for the asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of the world, making knowledge of our own minds the basis for knowledge of the outside world. In the 20th century this principle was not only doubted but replaced. It was the time of the psychological behaviorism, which led to the downfall of introspection as method.

After long discussions, it seems that today the question of the status of introspection as method is still a controversial one. Many contemporary Philosophers claim that introspection – as epistemological special – can at least be endorsed about certain targets – especially conscious experiences. Others defend that introspection is not special, even in those cases. Therefore, the dispute concerns the problem whether we should maintain introspection as special method or not. Decisions about questions like 'Is introspection enough to know our own mental states?', 'Is it sufficient to describe the behavior of someone?' or 'Can a MRI show what we are thinking?' will influence the way we study the knowledge of our private mental life.

Similar problems apply to introspecting the self. Classically, introspection is the access to the self. By now this is an open question. The question is whether introspection can count as adequate method to grasp all aspects of the self. To put it differently: is it enough to treat the self as a target of introspection or is the notion of 'the self as subject' more fundamental?

Introspection is a problematic topic. Still, it seems no matter what decisions we make, introspection will continue to have an influence on how we study conscious experiences and the self. But this might be no longer true. Recently, Eric Schwitzgebel came up with the thesis that introspection is not a

singular process but a plurality of processes¹. If this is the case, any form of introspection might be at risk.

In this paper I want to explore if this radical idea really affects all accounts of introspection. The strategy can be described as ‘case studies’. I want to identify a particular target of introspection – namely the phenomenal character of experiences – , explain the problem posted by Schwitzgebel and see if it applies. After that I want to repeat the procedure, substituting the phenomenal character of experiences for the self. I will conclude that the possibility for introspection depends on the complexity of the target. In the case of the phenomenal character of experiences the plurality thesis is no thread. But introspection – as method – is impossible to sustain when the self is the target.

II. The phenomenal character as target

When we talk about the target of introspection we often talk about mental states. Since there is more than one kind we have to be more specific. In general “the two most commonly cited classes of introspectible mental states are *attitudes*, such as beliefs, desires, evaluations, and intentions, and *conscious experiences*, such as emotions, images, and sensory experiences.” (Schwitzgebel 2010, p. 7) The limits are not always clear. Often a complex thought might include more than one type of mental states. According to Schwitzgebel there can be the problem to what extent one introspective mechanism – for one specific target – is a reliable mechanism in general or for some other specific target. This is an issue we should keep in mind. It will be briefly discussed in the next section. First, the intended target needs to be clarified.

The introduction already states that the first 'case study' will be about the *phenomenal character* as the target of introspection. The phenomenal character is primarily connected to *conscious experiences*. But that is not enough. The entanglement has to be made explicit. Experiences (see Siegel 2007, 2011a and Chalmers 2010) can be thought in this way: for an experience, there is its content and its phenomenal character (here, the focus does not lie on the content of an experience, the intended target is the *phenomenal character* of an experience). This may lead to some concerns. One concern is how the phenomenal character or property is instantiated. According to Chalmers there are two possibilities: One is that “[...] phenomenal properties are instantiated by mental states and as if there are entities, namely experiences, that bear their phenomenal properties essentially.” (Chalmers 2010, p. 253) The other possibility is that “[...] one can [...] speak as if phenomenal properties are directly instantiated by

¹ See Schwitzgebel forthcoming

conscious subjects, typing subjects by aspects of what it is like to them at the time of instantiation.” (Chalmers 2010, p. 253) This suggests different ontologies. This problem is of no concern here, since in both cases some sort of relation between subject, experience and *phenomenal character* is available². The only important thing is: there is *phenomenal character* different from the content of the experience that is related to the content of the experience. How this relation is instantiated has – in this particular case – no effect on the discussion of the possibility of an account of introspection.

Another concern may be that this could tie the *phenomenal character* to a metaphysical claim. Chalmers for example defends phenomenal realism: This is “the view that there are phenomenal properties (or phenomenal qualities or qualia) – properties that type mental states by what it is like to have them – and that phenomenal properties are not conceptually reducible to physical or functional properties.” (Chalmers 2010, p. 252) I think that in this particular case that is also not necessary. The only thing necessary is to take the quality 'what it is like' to have them seriously and one can do so in various ways. I propose therefore to leave the metaphysical and ontological issues aside and concentrate instead on 'what it is' like qualities in an intuitive sense as implied in Thomas Nagel's article *What is it like to be a bat?*. He describes it as: “Conscious experience is a widespread phenomenon. [...] No doubt it occurs in countless forms totally unimaginable to us, on other planets in other solar systems throughout the universe. But no matter how the form may vary, the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism. There may be further implications about the form of the experience; there may even (though I doubt it) be implications about the behavior of the organism. But fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is to *be* that organism – something it is like *for* the organism.” (Nagel 1974, p. 1)

This implies no particular metaphysical claim. It only implies that for something to count as conscious it has to have a *subjective character of experience* (see Nagel 1974). The target of introspection in this 'case study' – the *phenomenal character* of an experience – can therefore be characterized as the *subjective conscious character of an experience*, that means the subjective quality what it is like *for someone* to have an experience. This might not be an exact definition, but it is a sufficient characterization.

² It probably would turn out that in the two cases the models and the status of introspection would differ. But I am not concerned with models and status, I am interested whether an account of introspection is possible or not.

III. The plurality thesis

The target of introspection for the first 'case 'study' has been identified as what is called the *phenomenal character* of an experience. The question will now turn to the following: can we give an introspective account of the target? The Schwitzgebelian plurality thesis might prevent such a possibility. Again, if introspection is not one single process but a plurality of processes then it might be difficult to establish an account of introspection.

Let us consider Schwitzgebel's thesis from the article *Introspection, What?:* "Introspection is not a single process but a plurality of processes. It's plurality both *within* and *between* cases: Most individual introspective judgments arise from a plurality of processes (that's the within-case claim), and the collection of processes issuing in introspective judgments differs from case to case (that's the between-case claim). Introspection is not the operation of a single cognitive mechanism or small collection of mechanisms. Introspective judgments arise from a shifting confluence of many processes, recruited opportunistically." (Schwitzgebel forthcoming, p. 2)

The between-case claim has no influence in this particular analysis. There is one characterized target and it is enough that an introspective account can be given which is only valid for this particular target. Just to be more explicit. The preceding characterization (about the target of introspection) already stated that there might be a difference between introspecting one's *attitudes* and one's *conscious experiences*. Consider Christopher Hill's idea: "[...] assuming that pains and images are alike in that they have little or no conceptual content, the faculties responsible for registering their comings and goings are likely to resemble one another more than either resembles the faculty that is charged with keeping track of passing wishes." (Hill 2011, p. ??)³ Hill is saying that different introspective targets can differ in their faculties as well. Since those faculties lead to introspective judgments, one unified account of introspection is problematic. This seems to be a valid point, but it is no thread to an introspective account which is only valid for one particular target. Since I do not want to claim that the introspective account of the phenomenal character of experiences is valid for another target or valid in general, the between-case claim can be disregarded.

When we think about the within-case claim, circumstances are different. It is assumed that even for one target there might be different introspective mechanisms. To explain the problem, Schwitzgebel chooses three examples of *conscious experiences*: *Visual experiences*, *Emotions* and *Imagery*. In those examples he tries to explain how we get to know our experiences, using introspection. Since we are

³ See also Schitzgebel forthcoming

talking about different targets of conscious experiences he suggests different forms of introspection again. That is not all. He also suggests that in those different examples, there is not one introspective process involved but a variety of cognitive processes, which cannot be isolated from the introspective process. The view he endorses is the following: “Introspection is the dedication of central cognitive resources, or attention, to the task of arriving at a judgment about one's current, or very recently past, conscious experience, using or attempting to use some capacities that are unique to the first-person case [...], with the aim or intention that one's judgment reflect some relatively direct sensitivity the target state. It by no means follows that from this characterization that introspection is a single or coherent process or the same set of processes every time.” (Schwitzgebel forthcoming, p. 19) Let's have a look at one example and the corresponding explanation.

For convenience I have chosen the *visual experience* example, but any other would do as well. The example is described in the following way: “I look out the window and reach the judgment not only that there's a tree outside but also that I'm having a visual experience of that tree. I have greenish visual experience of the leaves, and the tree's spreading branches seem to dwarf the mountain in the background. It has just rained, and in the re-emerging sun, the tree sparkles beautifully. Focusing my gaze on the rightmost branches, I notice a fluttering indistinctness in my experience of the left side of the tree. I cross my eyes, thinking it might make the tree double, but instead the tree only swims around my visual field, blurring and flattening.” (Schwitzgebel forthcoming, p. 6) What are the conclusions Schwitzgebel draws from this example? The first conclusion is about the greenish visual experience of some sort he is having. He assumes that someone stands next to him and can reach the same conclusion about his greenish visual experience. For all the other person knows, “(a.) that [he is] looking at a green thing in good conditions and (b.) (let's suppose) that [he is] not colorblind.” (Schwitzgebel forthcoming, p. 6) Even though Schwitzgebel does not assume that some sort of knowledge about outward objects grounds his knowledge about his greenish visual experience, he still thinks that this sort of knowledge combined with his own capacities can “[...] play some causal and justificatory role in [his] knowledge of [his] visual experience.” (Schwitzgebel forthcoming, p. 6) Since he knows different things about his environment, he concludes that this knowledge influences not only his experience, but also his expectations about his experience, his willingness to make judgments about his experience and judgments of the experience itself. For him “[j]udgments about the sensory experience can easily collapse into judgments about the outside world.” (Schwitzgebel forthcoming, p. 7) So, if we introspect our visual experiences it is not a singular process, there is no process of seeing and apart from that a process of detecting. Both processes cannot be divided; there is a process overlapping. That is not all he concludes. He also thinks that there is more to it than just knowledge of external objects. “For example,

trying and *failing* to discern features of the tree is also part of the process by which [he] arrive[s] at judgments about [his] visual experience.” (Schwitzgebel forthcoming, p. 8) Furthermore, he assumes some cultural influences. To see the tree occult the mountain (like in a snapshot) or the tree's beauty for example, depend on certain cultural concepts or are at least culturally influenced. What he thinks in general is that “[he] reach[es] introspective, or apparently introspective, conclusions in part by launching processes that, considered on their own, are not introspective.” (Schwitzgebel forthcoming, p. 8) Like stated at the beginning of the section, I could have considered the *emotion* and *imagery* example as well. Apart from the differences between the targets (Schwitzgebel therefore assumes that in the other cases we also have to consider the between-case claim), I think the idea is clear. The example from *visual experience* seems sufficient to analyze what is going on. I want to note here that in what follows I will give an argument why this is not the case when we talk about introspecting the *phenomenal character* of an experience, but no detailed introspective account will be given.

IV. The argument against the within-claim

As long as we talk about *conscious experiences* I think that Schwitzgebel's argument is quite convincing. It seems to make sense that certain features – like the knowledge of external objects, cultural influences and so on – form part of the cognitive processes we use to obtain knowledge about those particular experiences. Even though it seems true in these cases the question remains whether that is true in all cases, and here especially in the case of the *phenomenal character*. To see if the plurality thesis works as an argument against an introspective account of the phenomenal character let us have a look at *the method of phenomenal contrast*⁴.

1. The method of phenomenal contrast

The method of phenomenal contrast has been brought forward by Susanna Siegel to determine the content of experience, especially visual experiences. I will not engage myself in describing what types of contents of experiences⁵ are possible, nor will I explain the method of phenomenal contrast in detail, what interests me are the implications of this method.

The idea behind the *method of phenomenal contrast* is that we are not capable to distinguish certain

⁴ See Siegel 2007, 2011a

⁵ For clarification see Siegel 2011b

hypotheses about the *content of experiences* by introspection alone. Introspection can already rule out certain contents – due to the phenomenal character of the experience – but it cannot decide between other hypotheses of the content.

To get an idea about why introspection is limited, we should have a look at an example: “Suppose you are looking at a bowl of expertly designed fruits. You have a visual experience when you see this scene, and we can ask which properties your experience represents as instantiated in the scene before you.” (Siegel 2007, p. 2) According to Siegel this leads to two hypothesis. The first – the so called color-shape hypothesis – states that your experience represents colors and shapes but not more. This means that your visual experience does not represent them as fruits. The second hypothesis is the cherry-content hypothesis. It states that your visual experience actually represents the fruit as being a fruit and also that they are fruits in a bowl. It seems that introspection does not help us to decide between the first and the second hypothesis. Introspection is therefore limited in its conclusions about the content.

In what aspect can introspection help us to determine the content? Siegel defends that for any content represented by an experience, there is a corresponding phenomenal character. This presupposes at least the following claim: contents of experiences have to phenomenally adequate⁶. If I understand her correctly this means an experience with the represented content 'yellow' will differ phenomenally from an experience with the represented content 'blue'. Therefore, introspection can detect the *phenomenal contrast* of those experiences and therefore certain contents⁷. Introspection is for Siegel basically about the phenomenal character of an experience in a narrow sense, that means introspection can detect phenomenal differences in different experiences and rule out some contents.

2. Phenomenal contrast and the plurality thesis

For Siegel introspection is quite limited. To put it in her words: “All that introspection is relied upon to do is to detect the phenomenal contrast.” (Siegel 2007, p. 15) But how does the idea of limiting introspection to the phenomenal contrast help us to find an argument against the plurality thesis? The key lies in the analysis of experiences. While Schwitzgebel seems to exploit the idea of a *conscious*

⁶ See Siegel 2007, 2011a

⁷ I want to note that the question about the phenomenal adequacy will have no effect on the rest of the discussion here. At this time I think that it is a strong claim – strong in the sense that it is controversial whether this is really the case. The idea seems to depend on an ontological claim, namely that the phenomenal properties seem to depend on experiences essentially.

experience as a whole, Siegel seems to develop a picture that analyses *conscious* (visual) *experiences*. A conscious (visual) experience in this analysis is described as having a content and a corresponding phenomenal character. More importantly: introspection refers to the phenomenal character of an experience – as it detects the phenomenal contrast – and not to the content. Schwitzgebel's pluralistic account on the other hand describes the forming of an introspective judgement about a *conscious experience* as a combination of factors. In a situation where I see a green tree my introspective judgement about this 'green tree' depends on knowledge of the external world, my expectations, cultural influences and so on. The reason for that interpretation is that in my view Schwitzgebel's target is the conscious experience as whole, that is to say the phenomenal character of the experience and the content of the experience combined. The plurality is created by giving introspection a target which is complex. So, when I have a 'green tree' experience and form a judgement about that experience as a whole, then there are influences other than introspection. A description of that experience may include a component of background knowledge or knowledge about the world, expectations, cultural influences and other factors. This depends on how I am inclined to analyze the content of the 'green tree' experience. The phenomenal character of that experience on the other hand does not depend on this kind of information. Introspecting the current phenomenal character of the 'green tree' experience only relies on the phenomenal character itself, even if that means that the self-knowledge obtained is an extremely limited one. It might be that introspection – in this case – only leads to something like the detection of the phenomenal contrast of different experiences and therefore its value only lies in a basic comparison. As I see it that depends on the account of introspection one defends. In general, I think this shows that introspective accounts are possible, even though more elaborated accounts have to be careful that they do not claim too complex structures.

V. Knowing one's self by introspection

The previous discussion – if an account of introspection is possible – also has an influence on the question of what Brie Gertler calls Self-identification⁸. The idea is the following: “In self-attributing a mental state, I recognize the state as mine in some sense, and my self-attribution partially consists in a reference to myself.” (Gertler 2011, p. 37) The classical view is that knowledge about one's own self is reached by introspection. This view is based on Descartes *cogito* argument. “The *cogito* argument

⁸ See Gertler (2011)

serves as a model for introspective self-awareness because introspection is the only source of evidence about the self that is available to Descartes' meditator when he performs the *cogito*.” (Gertler 2011a, p.217) As we can see, introspection is thought to be the method – at least in the classical view – that guaranties the access to one's own self. The question I now want to turn to is: how does the plurality thesis affect the possibility of introspecting one's own self? To do so, I will first analyze the introspective accounts of the self in general and see if the plurality thesis works as an argument against those accounts afterwards.

1. The self and introspection: an analysis

In the introduction I stated that apart from the problem of certainty, introspecting the self has the problem of adequacy. Introspective accounts of the self – like the Cartesian one – take the self to be the object of introspection. “Introspectivism thus identifies the “I” with the *known* thing, rather than with the *knower*. (Gertler 2011a, p. 223) It seems that introspection therefore fails to explain a fundamental notion of the self, namely the self as a subject. The idea behind the distinction is that the self – as an object – cannot be misidentified because it does not have to be identified with the subject and the self – as a subject – has to be interpreted as a basic notion. To say it with Gertler's words: “the known self is that conceived as an object, whereas the knower is conceived as a subject.” (Gertler 2011a, p. 225) This suggests that we should take a closer look at the self as an object and the self as a subject.

Introspecting the self as object means becoming aware of the self as an object. According to Gertler this is the case, because “[...] the introspective account of self-awareness is observational.” (Gertler 2011a, p. 223) This form of self-awareness is called object self-awareness⁹. Becoming aware of the self as a subject on the contrary is no inside we can know by introspection. This so called subject self-awareness¹⁰ is the foundation of self-awareness.

The distinction between object self-awareness and subject self-awareness seems to be close to an idea defended by Gallagher and Zahavi. They claim that self-consciousness actually exists in two forms. Apart from the reflective self-consciousness, there is a pre-reflective self-consciousness which can be characterized in the following way: “[...] (1) it is not an explicit or thematic form of self-consciousness, and (2) reflective self-consciousness is possible only because there is a pre-reflective

⁹ See Gertler 2011a

¹⁰ See Gertler 2011a

self-awareness that is an on-going and more primary self-consciousness.” (Gallagher/Zahavi 2010, ...) This suggests that there is an access to the self, which is immediate and non-observational, it presents itself in a first-person experience. They argue consequently that phenomenal consciousness includes a minimal form of self-consciousness¹¹¹². Gallagher and Zahavi put it this way: ““To have a self-experience does not entail the apprehension of a special self-object; it does not entail the existence of a special experience of a self alongside other experiences but different from them. To be aware of oneself is not to capture a pure self that exists separately from the stream of experience, rather it is to be conscious of one's experience in its implicit first-person mode of givenness.” (Gallagher/Zahavi 2010, ...) From this view we can conclude: introspection can only tell us something about the reflective self-consciousness or object self-awareness, but not about the pre-reflective self-consciousness or subject self-awareness.

2. The plurality thesis and object self-awareness

As we have seen in the previous section, the method of introspection can only be used to analyze the self as an object. Stated differently: Introspection is a form of reflecting about the self as an object. Introspective accounts of the self are often considered as problematic. Gertler, for example, thinks that an introspective account “[...] relies on the acquaintance theory of introspection, any challenge to that theory will also constitute a challenge to the introspective account.” (Gertler 2011a, p. 224) I think the case is even worse: the Schwitzgebelian plurality thesis prevents an introspective account right from the start.

As stated in section III. The plurality thesis consists in two claims, namely the between-case claim and the within-case claim. The between-case claim will have no affect on the discussion, since only one singular target (the self as an object) is of interest. Therefore the focus lies on the within-case claim. To remind the reader, the main idea is the following: “Introspection is the dedication of central cognitive resources, or attention, to the task of arriving at a judgment about one's current, or very recently past, conscious experience, using or attempting to use some capacities that are unique to the first-person case

¹¹ See Gallagher/Zahavi 2010

¹² Note that the minimal self-consciousness is not identical to the phenomenal consciousness. If this were the case, introspection about the phenomenal character of experiences would not be possible. Even though the relation between both is an interesting topic, it exceeds the intention of this paper.

[...], with the aim or intention that one's judgment reflect some relatively direct sensitivity the target state. It by no means follows that from this characterization that introspection is a single or coherent process or the same set of processes every time.” (Schwitzgebel forthcoming, p. 19) Schwitzgebel concludes that an introspective account cannot be given since there are influences like overlapping processes (background knowledge or knowledge about the world), expectations, cultural influences and so on, which make it impossible to describe such an account. We have seen that in the case of conscious experiences that might be true, but for the phenomenal character it is not. The reason – as stated above – is that a conscious experience is already a complex target while the phenomenal character of an experience is not.

What about the self as an object? As far as I see it, the self qualifies as a complex target. Having an analytical view on conscious experiences shows that it consists at least of two parts¹³: the phenomenal character and the content. As we have seen above, the self can also be analyzed in two ways, namely the self as a subject and the self as an object. At this point, one may be inclined to construct an analogy. I believe that this is not the right strategy. In an analogy the phenomenal character would correspond to the self as subject or the pre-reflective self. It is obvious that this cannot be the case. The phenomenal character is introspectible while the pre-reflective self is not. Also, at least according to Siegel, contents of experiences have to be phenomenally adequate¹⁴. So some sort of close, mutual relation between content and phenomenal character seems to be implied. The pre-reflective self and the reflective self on the other hand do not have such a relation. According to Gallagher and Zahavi, “[t]o have a self-experience does not entail the apprehension of a special self-object[.]” (Gallagher/Zahavi 2010, ...) The pre-reflective self-awareness is therefore necessary for a reflective self-awareness, but it does not imply it.

So, why does the self – as an object – count as a complex target for introspection then? Because it is a conceptual construct. The self we are aware of in the first place is the self as a subject. Since it is minimal, we conceptually construct a 'self' around it. Introspecting this 'self' means we actually reflect about it. When I want to know something about my 'self' I consult my memory, I apply concepts I learned from psychology, I expect to find certain traits, I compare myself to others, I see my 'self' as a

¹³ This does not mean that the parts of conscious experiences really exist independent from each other. I would rather think of them in a way that – while co-existing – the phenomenal character of an experience is the subjective, qualitative processing of an experience, while the experience – as representation – has an informational content.

¹⁴ See Siegel 2007, 2011a

genuinely existing individual, not like in Buddhist cultures, and so on. This actually indicates the Schwitzgebelian idea “[...] that introspection is [not] a single or coherent process or the same set of processes every time.” (Schwitzgebel forthcoming, p. 19) It is rather a pluralistic process where introspection is closely tied to other cognitive processes. We cannot resolve the overlapping issues since we cannot construct an account of introspection for the 'self' as target. An introspective account of the 'self' is therefore not possible. This shows that introspection – as a method – allows no conclusions about the self whatsoever.

Not so fast. An opponent might still argue that introspection interpreted as reflection is too much to ask. He could argue that introspection can be seen as as a detecting device, just like in the case of the phenomenal contrast. I think – according to what was said in this paper – this is not an option. Detecting the self is already prior to the act of introspection. It is the subject self-awareness which discovers the self. This pre-reflective self-consciousness ensures our first-person mode of givenness¹⁵, which leads to introspection in the first place.

VI. Conclusion

Introspection – as methodology – is a problematic subject. Even more, when a pluralistic overlapping of cognitive processes makes any thesis of introspection impossible. I think I was able to defend that introspection is not completely lost. The plurality thesis is a strong weapon, but it cannot destroy all attempts of theorizing about introspection. It depends on the target. The most important criteria is that the target is not too complex. The phenomenal character of experiences is one example of targets which can resist the plurality thesis. It is still not clear what kind of introspective account one should defend in this case, but I think this paper shows that there is the possibility.

It was also shown how powerful the plurality thesis is. The self as target of introspection has no future. Of course, we can continue to reflect about the self, but the introspective method is of no help.

¹⁵ See Gallgher/Zahavi 2010

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