

Is There an Ocular Self?

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Abstract: Whenever we refer to ourselves by means of token-reflexive pronouns, 'I' in case of English, the problem is that we tend to assume it yields the same referent both for the narrator and the narratee. But the fact is that the subject is a subject to, and of, others; in fact, it is often an 'Other' to others, which also affects its sense of its own subjectivity. The Self is not material, but understandably material-dependent. Again, the Self is not entirely subjective/experiential either, but understandably conditioned upon embodied experiences. In that case, the paper investigates the plausibility of an ocular Self: the impact of the ocular on (the materiality of) the Self.

Keywords: Ocular Self, visual perception, Derrida, Merleau-Ponty

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The Dionysiac musician, himself imageless, is nothing but original pain and reverberation of the image. Out of this mystical process of un-selving, the poet's spirit feels a whole world of images and similitudes arise, which are quite different in hue, causality, and pace from the images of the sculptor or narrative poet. ... [The lyrical poet] himself becomes his images, his images are objectified versions of himself. Being the active center of that world he may boldly speak in the first person, *only his "I" is not that of the actual walking man, but the "I" dwelling, truly and eternally, in the ground of being.* It is through the reflections of that "I" that the lyric poet beholds the ground of being.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1956)

1. Introduction

Studies on subjectivity have been approached from a variety of perspectives: neurobiological, postcolonial, feminist, psychoanalytical, sociological, new historical and so forth. While the logical positivist approach and suchlike had dispelled the human subject completely, with the post-modern turn we witnessed the return of 'little narratives' of the self. Whether in context to history, ethnography, autobiography, psychoanalysis, or gender studies, or even language for that matter, ontologization of the self has revealed a daunting territory worth probing into.

The uniqueness with consciousness as opposed to all other states, viz. the physical, chemical, biological and so on is that it cannot be homogeneously categorized as a completely physical, chemical, or biological state. Unlike the physical state, or the biological state, or the chemical state consciousness cannot be known from the 'outside', from the

third person perspective. Consciousness is different in the sense that we gain knowledge about it from the inside as well as from the outside. In other words, some knowledge about 'I' is amenable to only myself, while some other to others. Take for example, when I am seeing the doctor for a pain; he has, from his perspective and medical expertise, better knowledge of the pain than I do. But again, from the perspective of embodied perception, no one knows the pain from 'inside' as I do. In other words, the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the consciousness are tied as though in the form of a Borromean knot such that differentiation between the two becomes impossible.

Consciousness is also known from the first person perspective by an experiencing-embodied self. Therefore, there are two different ways of gaining knowledge about the phenomenon. This is some sort of an 'epistemic asymmetry'¹ because one can on the one hand obtain objective third person knowledge by looking at the physical properties of a human person (for instance, by looking at that person's body); and on the other hand, in principle, get complete chemical knowledge about all the chemical states that make up the body of that human being; one can describe the biology of human beings, and one can also describe the neurobiology, that is, all the objective scientific properties; one can describe the brain of this person. One can even move up to (minutely accurate) higher levels of description: one can describe how the (subject's) brain currently processes information, what kind of representational contents it activates. But when one comes to the level of conscious experience and one wants to gain knowledge about the conscious states of that person,

¹ Epistemic asymmetry more generally refers to the apparent fact that our knowledge of past events is typically more secure, more detailed, and more abundant than our knowledge of future events. I use it to refer to the potentially dissimilar mode of inquiry for the same object of inquiry.

one suddenly finds that there are two ways of accessing these states: one is from the inside, from the first person perspective; and the other is from the outside (e.g by observing whatever happens in that person's brain). So it is the only natural phenomenon— and an *entirely* natural phenomenon— that can be known from the inside and from the outside, and the problem is that we do not have a proper understanding of how that inside and that outside are related, and in particular what we are actually talking about when we say something like 'knowing from the inside'.²

Whenever we refer to ourselves by means of token-reflexive pronouns, 'I' in case of English, the problem is that we more often than not tend to assume it yields the same referent both for the narrator and the narratee. The term 'subjectivity', as Regenia Gagnier (1991, p. 8) has argued in her incisive investigation of Victorian self-representation, can mean in critical parlance today many things simultaneously: first, the subject is a subject to itself, an 'I', however difficult or even impossible it may be for others to understand this 'I' from its own viewpoint, within its own experience. Second, the subject is a subject to, and of, others; in fact, it is often an 'Other' to others, which also affects its sense of its own subjectivity. Third, the subject is also a subject of knowledge, most familiarly perhaps of the discourse of social institutions that circumscribe its terms of being. Fourth, the subject is a body that is separate (except in the case of pregnant women) from other human bodies; and the body, and therefore the subject, is closely dependent upon its physical environment. This paper begins with an attempt to understand the plausibility of an ocular self.

² For detailed discussion on this unique nature of bivalent inquiry on consciousness, see Blackmore, (2006).

Let's begin with a story which sets out the problem I seek to discuss. Having crossed a river, a group of travelers wanted to make sure everyone was safe. The leader counted the group but omitted himself from the count. So did the rest of the members till they were convinced that one of them was missing. The group was scared and started searching the river until a passerby suggested that each person should count their own self as well. Finally the travelers were relieved and they continued on their way forth³.

The 'I', as in *the self*, is, much like the myth; it is as though the 'I' is a "second order semiological-system" (Barthes, 1989, p. 123) that is always laden with meaning 'surplus' to itself. This is why Strawson (2005, p. 26) forewarns not to lose sight of at least two deeper philosophical questions that can be asked about this *self*: first, when we employ 'I' to refer to ourselves, what are the distinct properties of ourselves by means of which we attempt to pick ourselves out for purposes of reference? Second, what is the *essence* or identity of these selves?

While the former is but a quasi-impersonal way of posing a mystery that can in the last recourse only be expressed in the first-person, indexical language, the focus of this paper shall be based on the second pursuit: What is it that makes the ocular self? Are we then beginning with the assumption that there is an ocular self? We have to start with an idea of the self that we have made ours. Whether one goes with Heidegger and assumes that the self is a way to be in the world – in the form of the *Dasein*⁴ being the resolute way of

³ A popular Indian tale, sources unknown.

⁴ Heidegger's term for the unique kind of human *being* that could be theorized beneath the level of the artificial and the selective (Cartesian?) subjectivities is *Dasein* (1962: 27), commonly meaning *existence*, but literally *being-there*, a term invariably left untranslated. It constitutes the fact that the

emerging from the anonymity of the mass of the 'they' – or whether the 'self' is the changing but distilled core of our experiences, the existence of an ocular self sounds plausible.

Presumably the self is not merely the (corporal body of) whole person, in which case, the principle aim of the paper would be to examine the questions: Is there something exterior to the body that construes the self? What, if at all there is one, is the role of the ocular? This is not to say that the self is (entirely) ocular; neither to render any relative importance to ocular perception. To put simply: if the perception of the self is coordinated through different faculties, what among those is the role of the ocular? In other words, is there an ocular dimension to the self? Are we then going to say that before cognition, we have to have bodies? Does embodiment precede cognition? If embodiment has to be the condition of cognition of the self, there must be specificities of individual sensory perception, which means that what the eye contributes to the cognition of the self can never be simulated otherwise. Now this has to be examined seriously.

This occurred as a classic problem of incredible importance within the tradition of Indian philosophy of science. The word *pramana* (<*prama*=truest/superior knowledge), in the Indian tradition, stands for 'means of attaining knowledge (*prama*)', or in other words 'that by which we know that we know'. To put simply *pramana* is what we in the modern academic lingo prefer to call 'methodology'. So *pramana* is virtually the testimony to knowledge, and it would be interesting to note that *pratyakshya-pramana* (*pramana* reached through sensory

human subjectivity is *not* a result of any interiority, rather shaped by experiences of existence in the world.

perceptions) constitutes only one of twelve modes⁵ to testify knowledge. This explains why Sanatsujata's advice to Dhritarashtra in explaining the state/qualities of a *yogin* (the person conferred ultimate realization), in 'Sanatsujatiya', Udyogparva, *Mahabharata*, does not seem contrapunctal or paradoxical: 'No one beholds him [the yogin] with his [sic.] eye, but they who with wisdom, mind and heart gain knowledge of him have become immortal'. (Buitenen, 1978, p. 292)

The experience of those who go blind as adults has been revealed to be an infinitely different experience. John Hull, who completely went blind in his forties, has written about some of these experiences in his diary, *Touching the Rock* (1992). This narrative covers the first few years of blindness and the profound mental adjustments he was forced to make. Hull (1992, entry dated: 25 June 1983) realizes: '... [T]he face is the mirror image of the self', and goes on to ask, 'to what extent is the loss of image of the face connected with the loss of image of the self?' He became aware of facial actions in ways the eyed are not. Motor programs, which for most of us are non-conscious, became conscious and began to permeate his self-image. Slowly, and through prolonged and persistent cognitive effort, he learnt to reconstruct his new way of relationships, both with the external world and his inner self and social existence, without vision. Hull (1992, entry dated: 17 September 1983) writes, 'Nearly every time I smile, I am aware of it... aware of the muscular effort: not that my smiles have become more forced... but it has become a more or less conscious effort. It must be because there is no reinforcement... no returning smile... like sending off dead letters... I can feel myself stopping smiling... must ask someone if it is true.'

⁵ The rest being *Anumaana*, *Upamaana*, *Sabda*, *Arthaapatti*, *Anupalabधि*, *Itihaasa*, *Sambhava*, *Aitihya*, *Abhaava*, *Ceshta*, *Yukti*

While on the one hand, it appears in Hull's account that the relation between ourselves and the objects, events, and processes in the world is dis-corded, and hence the *self* is subject to irremediable ambiguity once there is the slightest disruption in the 'normal' schema of sensory-perspectives, we are, however, still left to account for the blind painters on the other. It would be relevant here to cite the case of Benodbehari Mukherjee⁶, one of the pioneers of Indian modern art. Already born with poor eyesight, one eye completely blind and the other seriously myopic, he failed to carry on his studies as a child and eventually after much struggle against resistance from the authorities was admitted to the Kalabhavan, Shantiniketan by dint of Tagore's recommendation, but went completely blind during the peak of his career. Despite this, blindness enabled him to explore newer 'unseen' forms and expressions that started to manifest in his paintings (also murals) after this phase⁷. The most amazing of his accounts is touchingly recorded by Satyajit Ray (1984), the film-maker, to whom he had been a teacher while the latter was a student in the Kalabhavan, in his memoirs 'Binod-da'. When Ray was making his documentary *The Inner Eye* (1972) – a tribute to his erstwhile teacher – Mukherjee is quoted to have said: "Just show (on the screen) a single palm-tree on the banks of the *Khowai*⁸...Only that stands for my spirit!" (Ray, 1984, p. 128). Mukherjee had seen palm-trees in his life before going blind

⁶ He was born in 1904 and died in 1980.

⁷ Mukherjee (2006) recorded his memoirs and ideas on Indian aesthetics in *Chitkrakar*, now available in English translation.

⁸ Annotation mine. *Khowai*, literally meaning decay/ the decaying (noun), is a barren piece of land that had once been highly romanticized in Tagore's literature and subsequent eras leading it now to become very touristy.

and must have retained the memory; but what astonishes me is the conviction that it is the image of the palm-tree (and nothing else) that is the most effective metaphor of his 'spirit'. Is it simply a choice of metaphor among many that he wished his 'spirit' to be communicated to Ray's audiences, or is it the *vision* of 'an inner eye' that despite its blindness could perceive what an imagery of the palm-tree was able to provoke/conjure in the perception of the eyed audiences in context to his oeuvre?

This obviously leads us to ask: Is it the eye and the eye only that is responsible for (the perception of) sight? Is it the eye only that determines the ocular self? Merleau-Ponty (2000, p. 353) writes: "The painter 'takes his body with him,' says Valéry. And indeed, we cannot see how a Mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body—*not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.*"⁹ Does vision at all mean anything unless *I* see? Reflection of light in the optical nerves is the necessary but still insufficient condition for *vision*, as we perceive it. This aspect of embodied vision has further been problematized in this thought-experiment: "If I trace a 'b' on the back of your head, you'll report that I wrote a b; if I trace the same on your forehead, you'll probably perceive it as a d. It's as if you had a 'disembodied eye' behind your head reading the pattern traced." (cited in Strawson, 2005, p. 101) Take for example, the case of eye-direction detection. Tracing the patterns of others' eye movement we are instinctually able to 'see' what we actually do not see. This happens during driving all the time. Also, during eye-contact conversations I

⁹ Merleau-Ponty cites Valéry but does not mention the source.

see myself being seen in the first instance, and then I try to gauge those or that I do not see [say, the reaction of one standing at my back] on the basis of how I am being seen.

"What happens", asks Derrida (1993, p. 3), "when one writes without seeing?" – "A hand of the blind ventures forth alone or disconnected, in a poorly delimited space, it feels its way, it gropes, it caresses as much as it inscribes, trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight. It is as if a lidless eye has opened at the tip of the fingers..." Derrida sees the act of painting as always rooted in cultural memory, wilderness, the sublime and anticipation; and hence *seeing* a painting necessarily involves a *difference* between the two distinct acts of seeing: one direct, that of the painter and the other mediated, the spectatorial gaze. Derrida says that the lines, those that are virtually the blueprints of any piece painting, are themselves never fully visible to the viewer since they exist only in an amorphous state of (multiple) possibilities or a variety of forms: as marks and lay-outs on a page, as indicators of a contour, suggestions of a torso and so on. Hence these lines lack a 'pure-autonomous' identity; but always supplement a sonorous-tactile discourse that renders the visual experience obscure.

In other words, *to see* and *see-ing* are not the same. If Derrida is correct, then the blind are not *see-ing* because the optical nerves in the blind's eye are incapable of responding to 'external' oculo-sensory stimulus; yet the blind do *see*. *To see* is all about the optometry, the sensory-motor responses in the optical nerves while the act of *see-ing* always involves a human subject. For that matter, the dead person's eyes do see, the camera lenses indeed see; but the perception of sight presumes the existence of the *ocular self*. Whether or not we are convinced of Derrida's arguments is beyond the point at least in this scope of discussion. But the most important twist Derrida brings into the problem is to inaugurate the question of the human subject and the *ocular self*. Merleau-Ponty even seems to take this

baton a step further. He reinvigorates the assertion in saying that the embodiment (here, the endowment of being eyed) itself is the ocular self:

Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the seer does not appropriate what he sees; he sees it by means of the gaze, he opens onto the world. And for its part, that world in which he participates is not in-itself or matter... We *are* the compound of soul and body, and so there must be a thought of it. It is to this knowledge by position or situation that Descartes owes what he himself says of it, or what he sometimes says of the presence of the body “against the soul,” or of the exterior world “at the tip” of our hands. Here the body is no longer the means of vision and touch, but their depository. Our organs are not instruments; on the contrary, our instruments are added-on organs. Space is not what it was in the *Optics*, a network of relations between objects such as would be seen by a third party witnessing my vision, or by a geometer who reconstructs my vision and surveys it. It is, rather, a space to be reckoned starting from me as the null point or degree zero of spatiality. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me.

I will now provide my thoughts on whether those lacking sensory functionality lack an ocular self. Firstly, would deaf lack an ocular self? O do not think so. Puzzled with how Beethoven composed music so eminently despite himself being deaf, Roland Barthes (1977, pp. 152-153, emphasis mine) explains: “The truth is perhaps that Beethoven’s music has in it something *inaudible* (something for which hearing is not the *exact* locality), and this brings us to the second Beethoven...[B]eethoven’s deafness designates the lack wherein resides all signification; it appeals to a music that is not abstract or inward, but that is endowed, if one may put it like this, *with a tangible intelligibility, with the intelligible as tangible...the work*

that complies with it cannot be received on the basis of pure sensuality...” So auditory perception, by Barthes’ explanation, is always surplus to grasping that is tangible about the auditory experience.¹⁰ Thus, those that lack auditory perceptions might still be able to grasp what is tangible about the auditory experience, and so still might have an ocular self.

Secondly, would the blind lack an ocular self? Perhaps not if they could, in a similar way to the deaf, be able to grasp what is tangible about the visual experience even if they lack visual perception. But what would the Lacanian ‘Mirror stage’ mean for the blind? It indeed left me long wondering whether the ‘outcome’ of the mirror stage could be explained in terms of tactile sensation - say, the child sensing, when held, that s/he is both in ‘one piece’ (integrated) and smaller and less capable than the adult who holds him or her - until I realized there is no reason, whatsoever, to assume it to be an outcome of a literal ‘mirror

¹⁰ To Further illustrate Barthes’ explanation, I am tempted in this context to cite the climatic sequence from the film, *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (1995). In the movie, Glenn Holland (played by Richard Dreyfuss), a young, aspiring, composer and dedicated music-teacher is shocked to find that his son is deaf and his dreams seem to crumble as he increasingly realizes that he cannot teach his son the joys of music. Unable to accept his son’s disability, Holland throws himself into his work, becomes an inspiring teacher who touches the lives of his students but ironically struggles to build a stronger relationship with his deaf son. Years later, the son, now a garage mechanic, is repairing a car completely unaware that its horn was blowing loudly while his father was listening to a serious piece of music. When Mr. Holland shouts at him he leaves the car behind and gets into his father’s room and sits down at a corner feeling dejected. Soon after Mr. Holland discovers his son, deaf since birth, is moving his hands – presumably from the tactile sensation of sound waves – rhythmically to the music.

image'. Film theorists¹¹ who are heavily invested in psychoanalysis would tend to argue that one does not necessarily need eyes to pass through the mirror stage. Being blind would give the sense of the self a different dimension; nevertheless other sensations are capable of arousing the perception of an 'integrated' self in case of a blind, can manufacture for the blind subject, "caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to form of its totality" (Lacan, 1977, p. 4). It happens through reflection, which can come through touch, through speech directed at the blind, generally through the mode of addressal (of the film). That this address is accompanied by a name makes the child take the first step into the *symbolic*, the domain of naming, even as it receives the imaginary sense of wholeness.

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¹¹ Christian Metz (1977) belongs to this school. I resist myself to name more in order to prevent diversion.

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