

The Logical Structure of Experience

Preliminary Explorations

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Motivations.

The first section will focus on outlining a logic of subjects and objects as motivated by first-person phenomenal experience. I will take care to make no assumptions about whether these experiences are conscious, subconscious, or unconscious in nature. In section 2 I will turn to the notion of consciousness where I will examine the ramifications of our logic for the layers of conscious experience, in addition to defending a notion of witness-awareness similar to Albahari as phenomenal basis for experience. Finally, in section 3 I will turn to notions of selfhood and for-me-ness as discussed by Zahavi and Kriegel.

§0 A Note on Methodology and Scope

By proposing a logical system for the investigation of subjectivity I do not wish to make any assumptions about what actually *obtains* within the system. My goal is to set down a few, hopefully uncontroversial axioms by which to continue the examination of subjectivity. The system should be compatible with, for example, the British empiricist notion of atomic sense-objects, Buddhist notions of no-self, the Kantian intuitions, Jamesonian pragmatism, etc.

It is also necessary to defend the methodology. The logical system I propose is an axiomatic system based on first-order predicate logic. Formal logic in this style is typically considered the gold standard of logical thinking in the Analytic world, but it is not often used in phenomenological investigations. This may be at least partially due to the influence of hermeneutical theorists like Heidegger and Ricouer, who would claim (e.g. in "What is Metaphysics?" (heidegger2008)) that a proper understanding of logic - and thus of metaphysics - would require a hermeneutic that can account for the fullness of language. My thought in axiomatizing the logical rules of consciousness is only to formalize the rules of the language game we play when we speak of consciousness, and in particular to formalize the notion of the subject/object distinction. In order to get there we must first proceed from phenomenological grounds. I do not wish by any means for

the logical system outlined here to undermine the deeper methods of phenomenology, only to clarify them in rigorous manner, so that we can proceed more scientifically from the principles that we have uncovered.

§1 Subjects and Objects

§1.1 Ontology

Within the system I am about to describe, we are ontologically committed to at least one object: experience. A discussion of the larger metaphysical ramifications and material properties of experience, what I would consider “external” features of experience, are not of concern here. Instead we will be focusing on “internal” features of experience; its constitutive nature. As it is typically expressed, the guts of an experience are split between the subject which experiences and the object(s) which form the content of the experience. Continuously across time, discretely from moment to moment, consciously, subconsciously, or otherwise, the contents of experiences are directed towards subjects. We can consider an experience, in its most basic form, to be a single moment of phenomenal realization. Whether these moments are discrete, as in a flash theory of consciousness, or ephemera on a diachronically continuous field of experience - an infinitesimal on an analytic function - is to be bracketed. In any case it is clear that the existence of subject and object are mutually conditioned within the field of experience. But what is the nature of this conditioning? Our discussion will begin by dissecting a single experience. We will see that in order to defend a number of commonplace notions we will need to consider a few mutations on a basic set of axioms, including a possible diachronic extension. Later, we will analyze the consequences of these axioms and their place within wider discourse on the nature of mind.

Within our lived conscious experience there is a pervasive sense of subjecthood. This sense of subjectivity can be expressed as the sense of being the “I-who-experiences.” There is much debate as to the exact character and metaphysical status of this sense of subjectivity. For now, let’s assume that the subject is a coherent entity, regardless of the subject’s internal or external metaphysical features. For the purposes of our discussion I will consider a subject as *the minimal experiencing entity*. Whether this entity attains consciousness, selfhood, or any sensation at all is intentionally left vague. The goal is merely to understand its place within a logical system of experience.

I will call an *experience-object* (or *object* for short) the content of any experience. This includes sense perceptions, physical objects, thoughts, imaginings, etc. It remains to be seen whether subjects can themselves be objects, but for the purposes of our discussion we will assume that they are separate entities unless otherwise constrained by the system at large. Similar to subjects, we will not consider any internal or external