

## Subjectivity and the Elusiveness of the Self

“Where am I!” This is something we might expect to hear from hapless explorers or academics with no sense of direction. If we can, we’ll explain to our inquirer that he is east of East St. Louis and hope he can find his way from there. If he persists, insisting that he is not really lost, but only cannot find himself no matter how hard he looks, we might reasonably suspect that we are dealing with that peculiarly incorrigible academic explorer, the philosopher. When we hesitantly point to his body, we hear him explain, exasperated, “No, don’t you get it? That’s my body, but I’m looking for my self! And I cannot find it!” At this point it is tempting to slip away, convinced that our philosophical friend is throttling himself with the noose of his own cleverness and is at risk of intellectual suicide by denying that he in fact has a self. Nevertheless, we shouldn’t turn away so quickly: some pretty ingenious people from radically diverse schools of thought have endorsed the claim that the self ineluctably evades detection. Hume gets credit for this “insight” in analytic circles, but in the continental tradition we can find Sartre making a similar claim, and even further from the Anglo-American philosophical tradition we find the Buddhists suggesting that the liberation from the very idea of a self is necessary for enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> It behooves us to take a closer look at these claims.

As is the case with many philosophical inquiries, it is difficult to provide an outright answer to the question as to whether or not the self is elusive. The question itself is vague, but the interpretation of the question risks prejudging the answer. I do not wish to pretend innocence of this passive/aggressive intellectual strategy, so I will state my

goal at the outset, distinguishing my project from other investigations into the elusiveness of the self.<sup>2</sup> To start, let me be clear about the thesis I intend to explain and defend:

**The Elusiveness Thesis:** from the first-person perspective one's self is particularly unavailable to one's own awareness.

Two features of this thesis are worth noting at this point. First, it maintains that the self is *particularly* elusive. The thesis fails, therefore, if the only construal of awareness according to which we are not aware of a self leaves us unaware of other things we would expect to be aware of. The second part of the thesis that deserves mention is that the relevant awareness or lack thereof must be from the first-person perspective. This is a contentious phrase, and it lacks rigorous definition in the literature.<sup>3</sup> Here it is enough to say that the first-person perspective is the perspective that one can take on oneself that is not available to another. It excludes, therefore, the perspective one has on oneself by looking in a mirror, viewing a CAT-scan, or touching one's nose.

In what follows I provide an account of the elusiveness thesis that affirms it, but does not trivialize it. The self is elusive in a familiar and substantive sense, and this fact carries with it interesting implications about the nature of the self, subjectivity, and our most intimate perspective on ourselves. My explanation will not, however, remain agnostic about the existence of a self. On the contrary, I will present my explanation as if it presupposes the existence of a self. The nature of the self is worth debating, but the claim that there is no self seems a genuine non-starter for reasons that have been made quite clear elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> The view I advance, then, will claim that the self is elusive, but not because it doesn't exist, but rather because of peculiarities arising from subjects being objects of awareness.

## I. Arguments for the Elusiveness Thesis

There are at least three different arguments for the elusiveness of the self: two come from Hume, and one can be attributed to Sartre.<sup>5</sup> Although I ultimately think they are closely related, it is helpful to begin by keeping them distinct. They are what I will call the genetic argument, the phenomenological argument, and the subjectivity argument.

*The Genetic Argument:* Hume claims that he has no idea of a self, primarily because he cannot imagine the source of such an idea. He asks, “from what impression cou’d this idea be deriv’d? This question ‘tis impossible to answer without a manifest contradiction and absurdity; and yet ‘tis a question which must necessarily be answer’d, if we would have the idea of a self pass for clear and intelligible.”<sup>6</sup> For Hume, this concern about the genesis of the idea of self is crucial, since he has a rigidly empiricist conception of the sources of our ideas.<sup>7</sup> Every idea stems from an impression, and it would seem that the self’s having an impression of itself is unintelligible. We, of course, need not stick to Hume’s empiricism, but we can ask similar questions nevertheless: what are we looking for when we are looking for a self? What precisely is our idea of a self and where did it come from? It would seem we must come to at least a preliminary answer to these questions before one can make the elusiveness thesis stick.

*The Phenomenological Objection:* Despite Hume’s genetic worries, he did proceed to search for *something*, but apparently he came back empty-handed. It seems he did have

some idea of self, after all. He says, “It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos’d to have reference.”<sup>8</sup> This is something he cannot find. “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.”<sup>9</sup> Hume, it seems, is looking in his mind for that thing which is the subject of thoughts and sensations. He finds, however, only thoughts and sensations and nothing that can be said to possess them.

*The Subjectivity Objection:* Some philosophers support a version of the elusiveness thesis, but they seem to disagree with Hume both on the genetic and phenomenological fronts. We have an idea of self, they might say, and we do find something self-like upon reflection. The only problem is that this self-like thing we find is not in fact a self. Such an objection seems to be what Sartre has in mind, and one can find traces of this line of thought in Kant, Fichte and the early Wittgenstein.<sup>10</sup> Abstracting away from some of the Sartrean details which can become quite obscure, the idea seems to be that in a normal situation, when one is not introspecting or reflecting upon oneself but is engaging with the world, there is no appearance of a self on the horizons of our awareness. When one reflects, however, the act of reflecting actually changes the shape of what is reflected upon, constituting a self-like nexus of thoughts and perceptions in the process. This is not really the self, however, because the self—if there is such a thing—is what is doing the reflecting, not what is being reflected upon. “Thus the consciousness which says *I*

*think* is precisely not the consciousness which thinks.”<sup>11</sup> The self is elusive because all it yields to reflection is its proxy, not itself.

There is, to be sure, something odd going on in this argument. Assuming there is a self, it is there when you are not looking, but when you do look it sneaks behind you leaving a forgery in its place. This sort of skepticism about the nature of the self found in reflection would be *ad hoc* were it not for a deeper suspicion about the self being an object of awareness. The idea seems to be that it is part of the nature of the self to be a subject of perception or awareness, and something that is essentially a subject cannot be an object. At the very least, something crucial about the self is lost in its objectification—namely, the aspect in virtue of which it can truly be called a subject.

I maintain that there is something right and something wrong about all of these arguments, and that the deep truth of the elusiveness thesis cannot be obtained by focusing upon any one of them alone. My focus, however, will be in developing and defending a version of the phenomenological argument. I will draw heavily, however, upon the resources of the subjectivity argument in order to defend and explain the contention that the self eludes our awareness.

It is somewhat difficult to argue for a phenomenological claim. Hume didn't: he just made his observation, and left it to others to confirm it in their own case. What one can do, however, is clarify what we are supposed to be observing and respond to attempts at explaining away the significance of the phenomenological data. This, therefore, will be my strategy, and in the process the nature and its significance of the elusiveness of the self should become clear.

## II. Clarifying the Phenomenological Argument

At its most unrefined, the phenomenological version of the elusiveness thesis just maintains that we are never aware of the self—it does not present itself to us. Already many people will be ready to jump ship. “Other people are aware of me all the time, yet I cannot be aware of myself? Ridiculous!” There is something to this reaction and it cannot be dismissed lightly. The first line of response is to point out that the elusiveness thesis maintains that we are never aware of the self from the first-person perspective. The most intuitive way to flesh this out is through the notion of introspection. This notion is loaded with baggage, but no particular notion of introspection needs to be presupposed. (In particular, introspection need not be a particular faculty by which we perceive or “scan” our own minds—though I do not wish to exclude that there is such a faculty.)<sup>12</sup> For our purposes, let introspection just be the first-personal way we come to know our own minds in virtue of having those minds and experiencing their contents.<sup>13</sup> The elusiveness thesis, then, is that we are never aware of our selves in that way.

This version of the thesis, however, still invites the dismissive reply “Who cares whether or not the self is perceivable by introspection? My fingers aren’t perceivable by introspection either, but that’s hardly a matter for concern!” Again, this response should not be dismissed too casually. Materialists, who certainly comprise the majority of philosophers, must say that if there is a self it is a material thing, and introspection doesn’t seem like a particularly important avenue of access to material things.

Fortunately, this dismissal can be handled. Materialists no less than dualists should find the elusiveness thesis intriguing. For one thing, the materialist cannot say

that introspection is a particularly bad way to get at material objects. We do become aware of something in introspection, and if everything is material, introspection must be a way of becoming aware of physical things. The materialist dismissal, then, must depend upon the claim that there is no particular reason that the self should appear in introspection. We should be no more troubled by this, they might say, than by our fingers not appearing in introspection. I think this objection can be answered in two ways. First, by arguing that it is *particularly* puzzling that the self does not present itself in introspection. Second, by maintaining that in an important sense we can introspect our fingers as a part of our “body image:” pains, itches and the like seem to locate themselves in our appendages, generating an awareness of them.<sup>14</sup> Nothing like this seems to be the case for the self proper, however. Pursuing this second line of response would take us a bit far afield, so here I wish to pursue the first line of response.

Unlike my fingers, my self is involved in my every mental act. What’s more, as Descartes affirms with his *cogito*, it is known to be so involved.<sup>15</sup> It is always known to be there, yet it is phenomenologically nowhere. This strikes me as the true puzzle behind the elusiveness thesis: something which is undoubtedly always present during any cognitive episode seems to make no cognitive impact itself. Even if the self is ultimately physical, it would seem that it must make an appearance on the mental landscape if only because it is always known to accompany our thoughts. We can, it seems, get at the subject of our physical actions and events by simply looking at our bodies. The point is that such reflection seems to be unsuccessful in the mental case, leaving the subject of our mental lives elusive.<sup>16</sup>

### III. The Dilemma of Introspection<sup>17</sup>

When presenting the elusiveness thesis, I remained vague about the notion of introspection. But one might think a confused notion of inner-awareness is really at the root of the elusiveness thesis, and that once the proper notion is fully specified the problem of elusiveness dissolves.<sup>18</sup> It might be urged that the elusiveness thesis depends upon there being a sense of perception according to which we do not perceive the self, but do perceive other things we commonly take ourselves to perceive. So if the notion of perception involved in the thesis leaves other apparently perceivable things unperceivable, the elusiveness thesis about the self loses its significance. It will turn out that the elusiveness thesis confronts the following dilemma: either the sense of perception it presupposes is so narrow that even salient mental states are elusive, or the sense of perception must be widened to the point that the self no longer eludes inner-perception. If this dilemma holds, it would seem that the attractiveness of the elusiveness thesis stems from a confusion between distinct notions of perception.

To begin, let us grant two things: there is such a thing as a self; and sensations, thoughts and other mental “items” are in fact properties or modifications of the self.<sup>19</sup> These are crucial steps in the argument against the elusiveness thesis, and they would be denied by Hume, Sartre, and most others who defend it. They are independently very plausible, however, and the elusiveness thesis, as well as the objections to it, is much more interesting if these points are assumed as common ground.

Given these assumptions, the worry about the notion of perception involved in the elusiveness thesis stems from the parallel sorts of arguments that can be made against the

perception of material objects. Hume made such arguments, in fact, when writing about the perceivability of substance.

I wou'd fain ask those philosophers, who found so much of their reasonings on the distinction of substance and accident, and imagine we have clear ideas of each, whether the idea of substance be deriv'd from the impression of sensation or reflexion? If it be convey'd to us by our senses, I ask which of them; and after what manner? If it be perceiv'd by the eyes, it must be a color; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste; and so of the other senses. But I believe none will assert, that substance is either a colour, or a sound, or a taste. The idea of substance must therefore be deriv'd from an impression of reflexion, if it really exist. But the impressions of reflexion resolve themselves into our passions and emotions; none of which can possible represent a substance. We have therefore no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it.<sup>20</sup>

It is no exegetical feat to see the similarity between this passage and Hume's famous passage on the self. In both cases there is a denial of any impression that corresponds to what is supposed to underlie qualities, and in both cases there is the conclusion that there is nothing but a bundle of those qualities. It seems likely that these two are on par. But if the self is particularly elusive, it had better be more so than the table upon which I am writing. It would seem, then, that on this notion of perception—the notion employed by Hume himself—the elusiveness thesis fails, because the self is not particularly elusive but is just like all other substances in that respect.

Recoiling from this absurd notion of perception which makes tables and chairs unperceivable, we might turn to what Shoemaker calls a “broad” view of perception. According to this view, one perceives a thing when one perceives one of its properties.<sup>21</sup> We perceive the table by perceiving its color, its shape, its hardness, etc. What else is it to perceive a table? We get at things *through* their properties—their properties do not veil us from them! The problem with adopting this notion of perception, however, is that

the elusiveness thesis fails once again, because the self is no longer elusive. Just as we perceive the table by its brownness, we perceive the self by perceiving its modifications in the form of its experiences and thoughts. As Shoemaker says:

The ontological status of an experiencing, or an episode of being appeared to, is similar to that of a bending of a branch or a rising of the sun. One perceives a rising of the sun by observing the sun rising; here the primary nonfactual object of perception is the sun. ...It hardly makes sense to suppose that there could be a mode of perception that has as its objects bendings of branches and risings of the sun, but never branches or the sun. And it makes equally little sense to suppose that there might be a mode of perception that had as its objects experiencings but never experiencers—never subjects of experience.<sup>22</sup>

Or, as Chisholm says,

...if appearances, as I have said, are ‘parasites upon’ or ‘modifications of’ the one who is appeared to, then what one apprehends when one apprehends heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, is simply oneself.<sup>23</sup>

Once one realizes that Hume’s impressions and ideas are really just modifications of the self, it seems perverse to maintain that the self is not available to introspection. It is precisely as available to introspection as tables and chairs are to perception.

Although the “broad view” of perception makes selves perceivable, it seems obvious that there must be a sense of “inner-perception” or introspection for which the elusiveness thesis is true. Shoemaker allows this if the elusiveness theses uses the “narrow sense” of perception. There are three features of this notion which are most relevant to the case at hand. First, perception of something typically involves receiving identifying information about that thing which distinguishes it from other things. Second, perception by way of identifying information allows for the possibility of misperception.<sup>24</sup> Third, perception of a thing involves having representations of that thing.

It is characteristic of sense perception, of all the familiar kinds, that perceiving something involves its appearing in a certain way to one, a way that may or may not correspond to the actual nature of the thing perceived. An object's appearing a certain way to someone involves that person's being in a subjective state, call it a sense impression, having a certain phenomenal character; and how the object appears will be a function of the phenomenal character of the sense impression.<sup>25</sup>

The resulting notion of perception, which is modeled on the typical case of sense perception, involves not only the detection of an object's properties, but also:

a mode of perception must be such that someone's perceiving something in that way can enter into the explanation of how it is that the person has knowledge of that thing, where part of the explanation is that perceiving the thing provides the person with identification information about it, which it does by producing in the person sense impressions of the thing.<sup>26</sup>

On this notion of perception, it is quite true that we do not introspectively perceive ourselves. We do not have sense impressions of the self, and we cannot misidentify the self. As such, it might seem we do not identify it either.<sup>27</sup> If introspection, then, is to be conceived on the model of inner-perception, the elusiveness thesis is vindicated at least insofar as the self is not perceived in introspection.

The problem with this narrower view of perception is that while it does make the self unavailable to introspection, it also makes it the case that we do not perceive our own sensations and mental episodes. For one thing, we do not have representations of sensations any more than we have representations of a self, and in neither case do we face the same task of identifying our object as we do in the typical cases of perception. As Shoemaker says:

The conclusion seems to be that there is no such thing as an introspective sense impression of the self, just as there is no such thing as a sense impression of a pain or other mental state and (assuming that sense impressions are essential to

perception) that there is no such thing as introspective perception of the self, or indeed of anything else.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, once again, the self is not *particularly* elusive, as required by the elusiveness thesis.

At this point the elusiveness thesis seems troubled, to say the least. It founders on its inability to negotiate our initial dilemma: either the sense of perception it presupposes is so narrow that even intuitively salient mental states are elusive, or the sense of perception must be widened to the point that the self no longer eludes inner-perception.

#### **IV. In Defense of the Elusiveness Thesis**

The dilemma of introspection challenges the defender of the elusiveness thesis to make his somewhat vague phenomenological intuitions more concrete. In particular, it suggests that the only sense of elusiveness that seems relevant to the case at hand is elusiveness to perception, and perception is a notion that allows of multiple analyses. The worry is that the phenomenological intuition receives support only by equivocating between different analyses, such as the broad and narrow senses of perception. Once things are kept straight, however, one runs into the dilemma of introspection, which maintains that in one sense of perception the self is elusive but not uniquely so, and in another sense it is not elusive at all. To overcome the dilemma, then, the defender of the elusiveness thesis must either provide a third, plausible sense of perception according to which the self is particularly elusive, or he must explain the thesis in terms other than elusiveness to perception.

While I have no wish to battle for the proper use of the term “perception”, or enter into the debates about whether or not self-awareness should properly be said to involve inner-perception, I do think there is a clear sense of “perception” according to which the elusiveness thesis is true.<sup>29</sup> I wish to develop this sense by returning to the phenomenology of the case in light of the dilemma of introspection. Then, I want to explain ways in which both the narrow and the broad conception fail to capture the sense of perception that we intuitively grasp when we consider the elusiveness thesis. Then, in that light I will outline a sense of perception that holds promise for escaping the dilemma.

*a. The phenomenology of tables, sensations and selves*

I have granted the metaphysical thesis that mental states are ultimately properties of the self. Metaphysics, however, is not always reflected in phenomenology. Though mental properties “belong” to the self in the same way that other properties belong to objects, there is an important difference in the way the “having” relation manifests itself. Our paradigm cases of perceiving something by perceiving its properties are cases of perceiving non-sentient objects having properties—I perceive a table by perceiving its roundness, etc. We can apply this model to cases of perceiving subjects by perceiving their properties—as you might perceive me by perceiving my face. But with subjects we have a new issue about how subjects perceive themselves. In some cases this is not problematic, as when a subject thinks about himself as others think of him—by seeing himself in the mirror, for example. When a subject occupies the first-person perspective, however, and confronts his mental properties in the way in which only he can confront them—from the inside-out, as it were—the situation is different.

To see this, let's return to the comparison of our three cases: self-awareness, the awareness of our sensations, and our awareness of external objects. It surely seems that if Hume is right about anything, it is that we can direct our attention in such a way that we become aware of our pains, our beliefs, and our sensations. His description of this awareness definitely leaves important things unarticulated, but he is not wrong that we are aware of such things. Similarly, at the very least we must admit that the self does not offer itself to us in the same way that our sensations do. If we are aware of it in any sense, it is clearly not the sense in which we are aware of our sensations.

Still, granting that these sensations are properties of the self, Hume's reason for being skeptical of a self seems exactly parallel to his reason for doubting the existence of a substance underlying the table's properties. So, let's concentrate on the phenomenology of these two cases. In some sense it is true that in neither case are we aware of something over and above the properties of the self and the table. In introspection, we find our pains, beliefs and sensations. In perception of the table, we find its brownness, squareness and firmness. Phenomenologically, if not metaphysically, a bundle theory for both seems plausible.<sup>30</sup> Even if one were attracted to such a bundle-theory, however, one must admit that the self-bundle is very unlike the table-bundle. There is a certain presentational unity and co-location of the properties of the table which does not seem to hold in the case of the self.<sup>31</sup>

While it is difficult here not to be obscure, I maintain that the table's properties appear as properties of a "that," while the self's properties do not.<sup>32</sup> This can perhaps be made clearer by thinking of cases where it is appropriate and clear to ostend something. When one looks at a table and says "That is bothering me," one might be ostending a

property, but not necessarily. There is something there—the table itself—which offers itself to one’s attention. The case of introspection is quite different, and not only because one cannot literally point when demonstrating something in introspection.<sup>33</sup> When one introspects, the things that offer themselves to ostension are all properties of the self. In no clear sense can one say “that” and refer to the subject. At best one can say “that which is the subject of these properties,” but such involves descriptive reference to the self, not demonstrative reference. This is the sense in which the table appears unified and that-like while the self does not.

Phenomenologically, then, even if we remain agnostic about whether or not we are aware of a self, we must admit that the sense in which we are aware of it is not the sense in which we are aware of our sensations, nor is it the sense in which we are aware of external objects. I think this is the basis of the phenomenological intuition that the elusiveness thesis is after, and there is reason to doubt the ability of the broad and narrow senses of perception to do justice to that intuition.

*b. Broad and Narrow Perception Revisited*

Neither the broad nor the narrow conception of perception gets at the sense in which the self’s elusiveness is both unlike that of sensations and unlike that of tables. The narrow conception, at least as it is stated, seems particularly doomed to failure in the present case. In order to perceive something in the narrow sense, one must have a representation of that thing in the form of a sense impression. But no one wants to take the view that everything one is aware of must be represented by a sense impression. On the assumption that we are aware of our sense impressions—whether we regard such

awareness as perception or not—such a view would engender a vicious regress. In addition, one wonders why it should be the case that perceiving something requires that the one can misperceive that thing, unless that condition is simply a consequence of the regressive representation condition. As apt a characterization as the narrow view might be for our perception of external objects, it is simply a non-starter in characterizing our awareness of the mental side of ourselves.

The broad view, as stated, seems no more promising, in part because it fails to capture any robust sense of perception at all. The broad view maintains that one perceives something whenever one perceives its properties. This depends upon the following sufficiency thesis:

(PP): For any thing  $x$ , for any property  $F$ , and for any subject  $S$ : If  $S$  perceives a property  $F$  of  $x$ ,  $S$  perceives  $x$ .<sup>34</sup>

But PP is clearly incorrect. Consider again Shoemaker's examples. One can, in fact, perceive the sun's rising without perceiving the sun. At the moments before the sun itself peeks over the horizon, one can still perceive the sun's rising by noticing the cast of its rays or by perceiving the brightening of the eastern sky. One can perceive a branch's bending by hearing it creak or, if one is standing on it, by feeling oneself begin to dip. In neither case is the branch itself directly perceived.

The above examples all involve the "perception" of facts or events, and this might confuse the issue, since we are principally concerned with the perception of objects. The same points can be made about cases of object perception, however. One can perceive the cat's meow without perceiving the cat, and it is unfortunately often the case that one can perceive a smell without perceiving that which is giving off the smell. (Often,

finding the cat solves both of these problems.) Perceiving something's properties is simply not sufficient for perceiving the thing itself.<sup>35</sup>

The broad view can be modified, however, in a way that better captures Shoemakers intentions. According to the revised broad view, one perceives something when one perceives one of its *intrinsic* properties. Thus,

(PIP) For any thing x, for any property F, and for any subject S: If S perceives a property F of x, and F is an intrinsic property of x, S perceives x.

PIP is much more plausible than PP, avoiding the above counterexamples. The creaking of the branch is not an intrinsic property of the branch, nor is the brightening of the eastern horizon an intrinsic property of the sun. What's more, if PIP is true, we do in fact perceive the self because the paradigmatic examples of introspectible mental states are intrinsic features of the self.<sup>36</sup>

While PIP seems promising, there is something a bit odd about how it is generated from the defective PP. It is counterintuitive that the mere metaphysical fact that a property is intrinsic makes the perception of that property suddenly sufficient for the perception of its bearer. It seems unlikely that a metaphysical fact, completely independent of a subject's cognition, could have so significant an impact on that cognition. Surely it has to be in virtue of an epistemological ramification of intrinsicness that it plays such a crucial role in the analysis of perception.<sup>37</sup>

I propose that the reason intrinsic properties are particularly good grounds for object perception is that they are more likely to present themselves *as* properties of the object perceived. Intrinsic properties of an object are properties that object has in itself, in isolation from other things.<sup>38</sup> As such, its appearance is usually less dependent upon

the presence of other things, and so seems to stem from the object itself. Extrinsic properties can appear this way as well, but they do not do so as a rule.<sup>39</sup> Consider an example. The property of being a recording of Brahms' second piano concerto is an extrinsic property of my record: it obviously has that property only given the existence of Brahms, as well as the existence of record players, lathes, etc. But this extrinsicality has epistemological and phenomenological implications as well. The property only evidences itself when the record is on a turntable which is amplified and generating sound waves through speakers. When one listens to the concerto, the record itself seems to disappear, despite the fact that one is in some sense perceiving one of its properties. The roundness of the record, in contrast, clings to the record itself. The record cannot “disappear” when one is perceiving its roundness. This is generally the case with intrinsic properties—because they are more intimately bound up with the existence of their bearers, perception of them is more likely to yield perception of their bearers. Although there are exceptions—for example in the case of some of the so called secondary qualities—extrinsic properties are not as intimately bound to their objects, and so do not always enable perception of their bearers.<sup>40</sup> Call a property *object-presenting* when it makes a perceiver of the property aware of the object that bears it. While this definition gets at an important intuitive equivalency, it is admittedly not very enlightening in this context. The notion of object-presentation can be refined, however, by reflecting on suggestion by Chisholm. Consider:

Moreover, and this is the important point about external perception, if we know that we are perceiving a certain physical thing, then we are also capable of knowing that we are perceiving something that is just a proper part of that thing. But the situation is different when we perceive ourselves to be thinking.<sup>41</sup>

Chisholm, of course, denies the elusiveness thesis and maintains his “proper part condition” for external perception of physical things only. Ironically, however, he seems to have landed on an intuition at the basis of object perception that need not be restricted to perception of external objects. His considerations suggest the following definition of “object presenting”:

(OP) A property F presents object x to subject S iff when S perceives F, S must perceive F as a proper part of x.

In this context, then, the point is that intrinsic properties are more likely to enable perception of their bearers because unlike many extrinsic properties, when they are perceived they are usually known to be proper parts of their bearers.

How does any of this bear on the perception of selves? Well, according to PIP and the revised broad view of perception, when one perceives a thing’s intrinsic properties one can be said to perceive the thing. Furthermore, we perceive our own mental properties which are admittedly intrinsic properties of our selves. So far, it sounds as if we are stuck on the horn of the dilemma of introspection which denies that selves are elusive. I have argued, however, that it is not the intrinsicity *per se* that is doing the work in PIP and the broad view of perception, but rather a frequent epistemological upshot of intrinsicity: intrinsic properties are object-presenting. If it turns out that not all intrinsic properties are object presenting, then we have good reason to deny PIP and to prefer the following, which provides both a necessary and sufficient condition for the sense of perception needed for a defense of the elusiveness thesis:

(POP) For any thing x, for any property F, and for any subject S: S perceives x iff S perceives a property F of x, and F is an object presenting property.

If it turns out that mental properties in particular are not object-presenting, our initial dilemma can be overcome. In the next section, I will argue that this is the case, and that this idiosyncrasy of mental properties stems directly from one of the essential features of subjectivity.

### **V. The Slipperiness of Subjectivity<sup>42</sup>**

It is one of the most important, perhaps defining features of our mental states that they are intentional: they are directed at objects.<sup>43</sup> This feature redounds phenomenologically in the transparency of mental states.<sup>44</sup> Take our sensations, for example.<sup>45</sup> When we perceive a red apple, our sensation of redness takes us directly to the surface of the apple. The sensation does not stand out as some separate property of the perceiver. The naïve realists have this much of phenomenology correct: when we are perceiving or thinking about the world, it is the world itself that appears to be in our view, not our mental states. What is true of sensations also seems true, at least in the first instance, of beliefs and other propositional attitudes. When I report my belief about whether it is raining outside, I don't turn to myself and shuffle through my beliefs in search of an answer. I look outside. When asked whether I find a painting beautiful, I don't turn to myself and inquire—as if there were an authoritative “inner me” I must consult in such matters. Instead, I study the painting to determine whether it is beautiful. The upshot of this fact in our context is that from the unreflective first-person perspective, a subject's mental properties do not present themselves as properties of the subject. While he is aware of them in some sense, they are not in fact salient to the

subject *as his properties*: they are phenomenologically exhausted in their presentation of the world.

Combining these observations with the results of the last section generates an elegant explanation of the elusiveness of the self. Mental properties are intrinsic properties of the self, but awareness of those properties does not generate perception of the self because unlike most intrinsic properties, the mental properties are not object-presenting. From the first-person perspective, they act more like the extrinsic property of the record, making the bearer of the property disappear rather than appear. While at first glance it might seem *ad hoc* to maintain that mental properties are among the only intrinsic properties that are not object-presenting, such a charge is unfounded. It is essential to these properties that they are not object-presenting. For what would it be like if they were? They would present ourselves as opposed to the objects in the world, and would fail utterly in serving their purpose. If there are intrinsic mental properties, and such properties are essentially intentional, then such properties must be intrinsic properties that are not object-presenting.<sup>46</sup>

If one accepts the thesis that mental states are always completely transparent, one can be satisfied with the above explanation of the elusiveness of the self. As it happens, the transparency thesis can be defended against many apparent counterexamples.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, it seems intuitive that there are occasions when mental states are less than fully transparent. It seems doubtful that they are ever really opaque, in that they do not present the objects they represent, but they can make an appearance.<sup>48</sup> We can take a detached perspective on our beliefs, and we can distance ourselves enough to study our sensations, thus resisting their intentional force.<sup>49</sup> In such cases these states no longer

take us without pause to the world, but are available for a more detached consideration *as* mental states.<sup>50</sup> It remains to be seen whether in these cases the self can still be considered elusive.

Even when we distance ourselves from our mental states, and they make their appearance *as* appearances, they are not object-presenting. The problem is that to the degree that our mental states lose their transparency, *they* become the principle objects for our awareness rather than the objects that bear them or the object they represent. Our talk of “distancing” and “detachment” was metaphorical, but it was not idle. There is a sense in which once these things become objects for us, they no longer seem constitutive of our subjectivity—they are objects for us, but they do not appear to be modifications of us. To echo Sartre, these things seem to be posited by the self, but do not appear to be constitutive of it.<sup>51</sup> It is to this extent—but only to this extent—that Hume and his progeny, the sense-datum and act-object theorists, were right: in this detached perspective, our sensations seem to be objects for us. Their mistake was to move too quickly from the phenomenology of this peculiar moment to an ontological view of the nature of sensations and introspection.

To put this point in a slightly different and somewhat paradoxical way, our mental states could only make their appearance as subjective facets of ourselves when they are playing their subjective roles: enabling perception of the things they represent. In such cases, however, they are transparent and so cannot make their appearance to us at all. When they are viewed in reflective detachment, they do make a sort of appearance, but they make that appearance as objects for the self rather than as modifications of our

subjectivity. In neither case are they truly object-presenting. It is here that the subjectivity objection supplements the phenomenological objection.

For the sake of concreteness, consider what would be the case if Hume found what he seemed to have been looking for—a sensation which was always present and in view, whenever the self was thinking. Suppose it was a low hum, or a red spot in vision, or whatever else one might imagine. Would this satisfy him? Should it? Surely not. Such a thing would be a possible object of attention or perception, but what would make us take it as us? It seems to be an object *for* us, not identical *with* us! Now this whole thought experiment is a bit fanciful, but the point is that anything which would seem to serve the purpose of an introspected self would seem bereft of the subjectivity which would make such introspection a case of perception of ourselves *as subjects*.

The subject's perception of itself as a subject thus presents us with a dilemma. Either the properties which would be relevant to self-perception act as transparent vehicles to the perception of the world, in which case they are not really perceived as properties of the self, or those same properties are objectified, in which case they no longer seem to be subjective properties in the right sense. The result is that self-perception cannot occur despite the fact that we are aware of intrinsic properties of the self.

As tidy as it would be to leave things here, the story cannot yet be complete. For everything that has been said, it sounds as if there is no sense in which mental states generate self-awareness at all. Surely that cannot be correct! Even in the first-person perspective, with mental states transparent as you please, there is an indubitable sense that the things presented are presented to *me*.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, in the more detached

perspective, there is no doubt that these mental states are *mine*, whether they are presented to me as objects or not.<sup>53</sup> This is clearly a sort of self-awareness, and what could explain that self awareness if not the mental states themselves? Perhaps it is here, at long last, that we find the self in the first-person perspective.

These observations are both correct and undeniable. They do not, however, defeat the elusiveness thesis. While conscious mental states do generate a form of self-awareness, they still do not present the self to perception as, say, the roundness of a record presents the record to perception. When I am having a conscious mental state, the awareness generated is an awareness that the mental state is mine, but it does not present an awareness of my self.<sup>54</sup> In this sort of self awareness—when it is pre-reflective—the self is not an object of an intentional state.<sup>55</sup> My mental state does not take me as a direct object in the way external objects and, arguably, my mental states themselves can be objects. The self is, as it were, implicit in conscious states, but it is not *presented* by them.<sup>56</sup> In knowing that I am thinking, I am not presented with an object, but I come to know it as a fact about myself in virtue of having the sensations.<sup>57</sup> The self awareness generated by them is propositional, therefore, but not objectual. So although my mental states—by virtue of their indubitably being mine—do generate a sort of self-awareness, it is not the sort that contradicts the elusiveness thesis.

## **VII. Conclusion**

At least since Hume, western philosophers have been attracted to the claim that the self eludes detection in a peculiar way. Non-western philosophies have held something like this for a much longer time. Nevertheless, it proves to be rather tricky to

make good on this intuition. Many philosophers have done so by accepting dubious theses about the nature of mental states and introspection. They adhere to sense-datum theories, or views according to which mental states are like things, rather than properties of the mind. They conceive of introspection according to a model that has our mental states be objects for our selves, leaving the self itself apparently barren of any intrinsic properties and thus quite mysterious. In the end, many of the philosophers who are attracted to the view that the self is elusive wind up denying that there are selves, much to the perplexity of both common folk and metaphysicians.

In this paper, I have attempted to articulate and defend the elusiveness thesis without any of these presuppositions or repercussions. I maintain that selves exist, mental properties are modifications of those selves, and that our awareness of these properties is importantly unlike our awareness of objects. The irony, I think, is that these very commitments generate an explanation of the elusiveness of the self. It is the nature of subjectivity that the subject itself is not an object of awareness from the subject's own point of view. This is not to say something as jejune as subjects cannot be objects. Quite the contrary: as far as I can tell, the best candidates for selves and subjects are brains, and brains can certainly be objects. Rather, subjectivity necessitates that the subject escapes the first-person point of view, because it is necessary that a subject's mental properties be intentional and therefore do not present their bearers. If this were not the case they would constitute a veil thicker than any imposed by modern philosophy's "way of ideas," effectively shutting off thought and destroying the sense in which the "subject" could accurately be called a subject at all. Instead, our mental state do their jobs, making us aware of the world instead of ourselves, thereby constituting a unique class of intrinsic

properties that serve—at least from one perspective—to lead awareness away from, rather than to, their bearers.

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<sup>1</sup> I’m reticent to talk about the Buddhist version of this claim, since it is often unclear in those texts whether the relinquishing of the idea of self is a moral or an epistemological accomplishment. There are suggestions, though, of a Humean-type concern. See, for example, de Bary (1969) pp.20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most importantly that of Shoemaker (1996) and (1963) but also Chisholm (1969) and (1976).

<sup>3</sup> But see \*\*\*\*\*

<sup>4</sup> I have foremost in mind the arguments of Chisholm (1976) as well as Williams (1978). Williams’s argument is nicely summarized in Van Cleve (1999) pp.256-7. It is worth noting that even the bundle-theorist believes the self exists—it is just a bundle.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Butchvarov (1979) this “Sartrean” objection is what Hume had in mind as well. See p.251.

<sup>6</sup> Hume (1978) p.251

<sup>7</sup> This is obvious from the first page of the treatise, ( see Hume (1978) p.1) and one can find this sort of argument in his skeptical treatment of causation, substance and elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup> Hume (1978) p.251

<sup>9</sup> Hume (1978) p.252

<sup>10</sup> The text where Sartre is most explicit about this argument is Sartre (1993), and I have in mind Kant (1929) A350, B412, A356/B404, and A492/B520. Fichte’s version of the argument can be found in Fichte (1982) p.98, and (1985) pp.76-82. For Wittgenstein, see (1974) p.57, 5.63-5.64, and for an interesting exposition of Wittgenstein’s development on this very issue, see Stern (1995).

<sup>11</sup> Sartre (1993) p.45

<sup>12</sup> The most obvious proponents of such a faculty include, of course, Armstrong (1968) and Lycan (1997).

<sup>13</sup> There are many more distinctions among notions of introspection that should ultimately be made, but I don’t think they are necessary here. For an sample taxonomy, see Metzinger (2004) Chapter 1.

<sup>14</sup> See Martin (1995) for a development of this idea.

<sup>15</sup> I am ignoring, at this point, considerations of the sort raised by Georg Lichtenberg, which are answered elsewhere. See, for example, Williams (1978) or more recently Burge (1998).

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<sup>16</sup> Though I am speaking dualistically here, there is no need for this to have ontological significance. One could happily make this point even if one were a Strawsonian about persons, as in Strawson (1959) ch.3.

<sup>17</sup> The puzzle presented in this section owes a great debt to Shoemaker (1996) and it is very close to his argument there. Nevertheless it differs from his argument in some respects, in particular in my focus upon Hume's parallel commitment to the elusiveness of substance. I owe thanks to Justin Broackes for helping me see the importance of this parallel.

<sup>18</sup> This is clearly the view of Shoemaker (1996), as well as Chisholm (1976). I will focus on Shoemaker's argument as opposed to Chisholm's due to the somewhat idiosyncratic apparatus Chisholm employs.

<sup>19</sup> It is obviously confusing to speak of items as properties, as it would be to speak of events, states or processes as properties, since quite plausibly none of these things are the same. I'm intending to use "items" as an ontologically neutral term.

<sup>20</sup> Hume (1978) p.16

<sup>21</sup> There is obviously a whiff of circularity here. Since this is not a necessary condition, but only a sufficient condition for perception, the circularity would not be vicious, but even the apparent circularity can be smoothed out by analyzing property-perception as the receiving of non-inferential sensory information about a property, or something of that sort. The precise notion is not to the point here, which is why I wish to keep with the circular sounding but simpler analysis of object perception in terms of property perception.

<sup>22</sup> Shoemaker (1996) p.10

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<sup>23</sup> Chisholm (1976) p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Shoemaker (1996) p.11

<sup>25</sup> Shoemaker (1996) p.19

<sup>26</sup> Shoemaker, p. 22

<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere Shoemaker talks about such perceptions as having Immunity to Error through Misidentification (IEM). I have discussed IEM at length elsewhere, indicating doubts about its usefulness in such contexts. See my \*\*\*\*

<sup>28</sup> Shoemaker, p.21

<sup>29</sup> The notion of inner-perception is probably Shoemaker's real target in his (1996). For a plausible retort on behalf of inner perception, see MacDonald (1999). As I have said, it does not seem necessary here to take a stand on this issue.

<sup>30</sup> If a bundle-theory fails, it would seem to fail for more complicated metaphysical reasons, not for phenomenological reasons. I have in mind attacks on the bundle-theory such as the powerful one by Van Cleve (1985).

<sup>31</sup> The "presentational unity" I have in mind is not to be confused with the "unity of consciousness" which does usually obtain in the introspective case. The unity of consciousness, I take it, necessitates something like the following: if S is aware of p and S is aware of q, S is aware of (p and q). (See Nagel (1971), Marks (1980) and Van Cleve (1999) Appendix G.) This unity does not hold, for example, in subjects who have undergone a commissurotomy and are in selective stimulation conditions. This is a sort of "subjective unity" that is quite different from the unity as an object that I have in mind. For taxonomy of the various relevant types of unity, see the introduction of Tye (2003).

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<sup>32</sup> I have in mind here the sense of being a “that” in the sense employed by Aristotle as part of his definition of substance in *De Anima*, Book II, chapter 1.

<sup>33</sup> It is quite likely, in fact, that this introspective “that” should not be viewed on the same model as the public linguistic “that” at all. See my \*\*\*\*. All that is required for my purposes here is that in both cases there can be something like a demonstrative mode of attention, no matter how it is to be analyzed.

<sup>34</sup> Again, in response to the circularity concern, see note .. above.

<sup>35</sup> There is, of course, a sense in which we say “I am hearing the cat,” or after we have found out the source of the smell, “I smelled the litter box.” But this is not the sense of perception that seems relevant to perceiving the self. After all, even though you are hearing the cat, if it is hiding you have still not found the cat.

<sup>36</sup> I’m ignoring, for the moment, radical externalism about mental states. Such views might make it seem that the self has no intrinsic mental properties (see Dretske 1995, for example) but I don’t want to hang the argument on such controversial theses.

<sup>37</sup> For the record, in Chisholm’s version of the broad notion of perception, he does cash it out in epistemological terms. They are not, however, the one’s I will suggest, and they are not, in the end, adequate. Exploring this inadequacy would involve delving deeply into his definitions, which seems counterproductive in this context.

<sup>38</sup> I don’t pretend intrinsicity is a perfectly well-defined ontological notion. As is evident in studies such as Lewis and Langton (1999) it is not, but the details of the distinction need not be hammered out for my point to hold.

<sup>39</sup> A notable exception is the weight of an object, which is extrinsic and presents itself as intrinsic. This example comes from Shoemaker.

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<sup>40</sup> Just as there is a hornets nest surrounding the notions of the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction, so is there some doubt about where to draw the line between primary and secondary qualities, and whether we ever really perceive the intrinsic qualities of things. Dealing with this debate is beyond the scope of this project, but as long as there is something corresponding to the traditional distinctions, my point should hold.

<sup>41</sup> Chisholm (1976) p.46

<sup>42</sup> It should be pretty clear in this section that I am following the path laid by Sartre (1993), only without his ontology and with a few other twists that make the view more amenable to contemporary philosophy.

<sup>43</sup> Brentano, of course, is the one who initially proposed intentionality as a defining feature of mental states. See his (1973) p.88.

<sup>44</sup> This does not mean that such states are *exhausted* by their intentionality. In other words, the transparency thesis does not entail what is often called representationalism about sensations and other mental states. For arguments to this effect, see Kind (2003), Siewert (2004) and Stoljar (forthcoming).

<sup>45</sup> For transparency theses about sensations, see G.E. Moore (1922b), Harmon (1990), Tye (2000) and (2002), Martin (2002), Kind (2003), Siewert (2004) and Stoljar (forthcoming). For transparency theses about beliefs and thoughts, see Evans (1982), Moran (2001), Fernandez (2003) and Bar-On (2004). The most recent of the “naïve realists” who make a sophisticated case from transparency is probably Butchvarov (1998).

<sup>46</sup> Again, one could deny that these properties are intrinsic, by adopting a teleological view of representation as in Dretske (1995) or another fully externalist view such as that

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of Tye (1995). But if one does this, one can simply adopt the explanation along the same lines, only maintaining that the self has no mental intrinsic properties.

<sup>47</sup> See especially Tye (2002).

<sup>48</sup> Even Siewert (2004) who is not a real friend to the transparency thesis is careful to admit this much about transparency. See especially p.35.

<sup>49</sup> Loar (2003) calls this the oblique perspective. While my distinctions do not exactly parallel Loar's, there are many important similarities between his description of the situation and mine.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, the scenarios recounted in Peacocke (1983), Block (1996), (1998) and Siewert (2004).

<sup>51</sup> Sartre (1993).

<sup>52</sup> For a convincing portrayal of this fact, see Van Gulick (2006). For an attempt to argue for and naturalize this sort of self-awareness, see Kriegel (2006).

<sup>53</sup> Siewert (2004) argues for this.

<sup>54</sup> Here I am borrowing a phrase from Michael Tye. See Tye (2002).

<sup>55</sup> I can, to be sure, have self-directed intentional states on the more reflective level, but they locate me indirectly as the subject of those mental states I develop and defend this view of self-reference in \*\*\*\*\*.

<sup>56</sup> This account of self-awareness is in agreement with, and could potentially be explained by, the account presented in Van Gulick (2004) and (2006).

<sup>57</sup> Those familiar with Sartre (1993) and (1956) will no doubt notice that here I am trying to give substance to his notion of non-thetic self consciousness.