

'AWARENESS OF' AND 'AWARENESS THAT' IN THE IDENTITY THEORY

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In his book, *Philosophy of Mind*, Jerome Shaffer presents a new variation on an argument against the Identity Theory of consciousness (hereafter: IT). The argument occurs in the context of his discussion¹ of J.J.C. Smart's formulation of IT and may be summarized as follows:

Premise 1: Person A reports a red afterimage. Presuming A's sincerity we should say that "he was aware of the occurrence of something or other, of some feature or other."

Premise 2: It is obvious that A was not necessarily aware of the state of his brain at the time of the occurrence of that something or other. And in fact, A was not necessarily aware of any bodily or physical features at that time.

Conclusion: Since A was aware of something, but not aware of any physical occurrence, he must have been aware of some nonphysical occurrence.

From this argument Shaffer takes it to be shown that the occurrence in question contains features over and above purely physical ones, and that IT is thus false. I believe however that the argument rests on an ambiguity in the notion of "awareness," and that when this ambiguity is eliminated the argument clearly fails.

Before considering Shaffer's argument let us first note what he is not arguing. He is not simply restating the familiar objection to IT which is based on the differences of meaning between descriptions of mental events and brain states. It is clearly possible—indeed, more than likely—that in his report of the afterimage A does not mean to assert anything about the state of his brain. It may even be the case that there is no mental state description, 'M,' such that for some brain state description, 'a,' 'M' means the same as 'a.' But as Smart and others have pointed out, identity of meaning between mental and brain state descriptions is not required by IT. Rather it is identity of reference which that theory requires.²

Shaffer's argument, however, does not turn on such considerations. In fact, the argument does not require that A formulate any linguistic description of the occurrence. The argument can be made in terms of a prelinguistic state of awareness which A has. In experiencing the afterimage A is aware of some feature of his present state. He is attending to something "within." This much is clear. And it would also seem clear that if A is aware of something, but is not aware of something physical (i.e., is aware of nothing which is in fact a physical feature or occurrence), then he

must be aware of something nonphysical. So Shaffer's first premise and conclusion are acceptable.

It is in the second premise that we find the problem. There Shaffer postulates that A is not necessarily aware of the state of his brain. And he goes on to add his doubt that few of us are ever aware of the states of our brains. But here there arises the ambiguity in the notion of "awareness," between a propositional and a non-propositional sense of that notion. The first is normally signified by the use of the locution, 'aware that,' while the second is most often signified by the use of 'aware of.' It is surely accurate to say that most of us are not aware *that* our brains are in particular states at particular times. That is, there is probably no time, *t*, such that I (in my ignorance of neurology) am aware at *t* that my brain is in state *a*, where 'a' abbreviates a neurological state description. And in this sense of 'awareness,' then, the second premise is true.

But under this interpretation of premise 2 the conclusion no longer follows. That is, premise 1 together with a clarified statement of premise 2.

2' "A is not aware *that* his brain is in state *a*" does not entail either that A is aware *that* some nonphysical event is occurring or that he is aware *of* some occurrence which is not physical. Clearly it is possible that some neurological event is occurring but A is not aware *that* it is physical. And it is surely consistent to say that an event is occurring and that A is not aware that it is physical and not aware that it is nonphysical. It may be that A simply does not have a belief about the matter. It is similar to the situation in which I know that the weather is doing something but in which I am not aware that it is raining and not aware that it is not raining.

The other sense of 'awareness'—the non-propositional sense—can be employed in Shaffer's argument to avoid the difficulties just cited. A person may be aware *of* a feature of his present state or environment in an immediate or precognitive sense which carries no implication of propositional awareness. We often employ this sense of 'awareness' in discourse about animals. We say, for example, that the squirrel is aware of the approaching cocker spaniel when the squirrel looks up and runs for the tree. And we do not say that the squirrel is aware *that* a cocker spaniel is approaching him. What we mean in this context is that the squirrel is aware of some entity, *x*, such that *x* is identifiable by us as an approaching cocker spaniel. And we do not mean to assert that the squirrel is aware of some *x* and is further aware that *x* is a cocker spaniel. We have no reason to believe that the squirrel has such propositional knowledge or that he is able to differentiate between different breeds of dogs. Similarly, we might say of a person that he is aware *of* the smell of chlorine gas but was not aware *that* this smell was that of chlorine gas. In this context we would be

asserting that the person smelled something which, though he did not realize it, was chlorine gas.

From the cases above I believe it is clear that the locutions, 'aware of' and 'aware that,' can be used to make logically distinguishable assertions. In general, to say that "A is aware *that* p is the case" entails that A is aware *of* ρ (where 'p' abbreviates a proposition referring to the state of affairs, ρ). But to say that "A is aware *of* ρ " does not entail that A is aware *that* p is the case. For example, to say that "A is aware *of* the smell of chlorine gas" does not commit one to the assertion that A is aware *that* what he is smelling is chlorine gas.

Let us now reconsider Shaffer's argument, employing the non-propositional sense of 'awareness.' Once again, the first premise is acceptable. And the conclusion is correctly drawn. But on this interpretation of 'awareness' it is not at all clear that the second premise is true. Rather, it would seem to beg the question against IT. On IT it is perfectly consistent to say that:

- (a) A is aware *of* this brain state (which happens to be *a*), and that
- (b) A is not aware *that* his brain is in state *a*.

If it were obvious that we are not aware *of* our brain states, then IT would be just as obviously false. But the fact is that it is not obvious at all. It might well be the case that my awareness *of* my present mental state is identical with awareness *of* a brain state, even though I am not aware that this is the case.

For his argument to succeed Shaffer must infer from the proposition:
"A is not aware *that* *a* is in his present brain state,"

that:

"A is not aware *of* *a*, which happens to be his present brain state."

But this inference is not justified. It is analogous to an inference from:

"A is not aware that the smell he is smelling is that of chlorine gas,"

m350,to:

"A is not aware of the smell he is smelling, which happens to be chlorine gas."

And surely this inference is illegitimate.

In the paragraph following that in which he presents his argument Shaffer allows for the possibility that the something which A experiences might have physical features of which A is not aware. But, he states:

the person A must be aware of some of its features, or else it would not be proper to say that he is aware *of that* event. And if he is not aware of any physical features, he must be aware of something else. And that shows that we cannot get rid of those nonphysical features in the way that Smart suggests.³

This qualification does not, however, save the argument, since it retains the premise that A is not aware of any physical features. And this relies on the unjustified inference discussed above.

To summarize: there are two ways to interpret 'awareness' in Shaffer's argument. Under the first interpretation—'awareness that'—the premises are true but the conclusion does not follow. And under the second interpretation—'awareness of'—the first premise is true and the conclusion follows but the second premise begs the question against IT.

What is shown, I believe, is that the logic of 'awareness of' is similar to that of reference, while 'awareness that' is parallel to meaning. Just as there may be unintentional or "ignorant" reference to some entity, *x*, so there may be ignorant awareness *of* *x*. But there is no such thing as "unintentional meaning," nor is there "ignorant awareness that." Even though our statements about mental states do not have the same meanings as statements about brain states, they may have the same referents, whether we know it or not. Likewise, our awareness *that* we are in a certain mental state is intensionally distinct from our awareness *that* we are in a given neurological state. Yet it could be the case that our awareness *of* a mental state is identical with awareness *of* a brain state, even though we remain ignorant of that fact.

NOTES

¹ Jerome Shaffer, *Philosophy of Mind* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 46.

² J.J.C. Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes," in *Modern Materialism*, ed. by J. O'Connor (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), pp. 37-39.

³ Shaffer, p. 46.

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