

Conscious Experience: What's In It For Me?

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We begin with a familiar quote from Thomas Nagel:

[T]he fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism. There may be further implications about the form of the experience; there may even (though I doubt it) be implications about the behaviour of the organism. But fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states iff there is something it is like to *be* that organism—something it is like *for* the organism.

We may call this the subjective character of experience.

(Nagel 1974, p. 436)

Like Nagel, many take this ‘something it is like’ talk to capture, or at least point to, the central characteristic aspect of conscious experience: its subjectivity or subjective character. And it is now standard to speak of what it is like to have particular experiences, or kinds of experiences, and to refer to this in each case as the phenomenal character of that (kind of) experience.

A number of philosophers claim that sufficient reflection on the character of our conscious lives reveals the involvement of a certain feature whose presence is often overlooked or even denied. The feature they have in mind appears to go by many names: ‘for-me-ness’, ‘mine-ness’, ‘a sense of mine-ness’, ‘pre-reflective self-awareness’, ‘intransitive self-consciousness’, ‘peripheral inner awareness’, ‘ipseity’, ‘first-person givenness’, and more besides. So let us speak of *the intended feature* in order to refer to whatever it is that these phrases are intended to pick out. In a moment, we’ll look at some natural candidates for what this feature might be. For now, we can simply say that the intended feature is supposed to be, involve or imply some form of awareness of experiences.

There are debates both over the nature of the intended feature and over its prevalence. Our concern in the present paper is with the view that it is a universal aspect of conscious experience—that every conscious episode has the intended feature. Call this view *universality*.

This paper has two central aims. The first is to arrive at a clear and minimal statement of what the intended feature is supposed to be. We do this in §1 by distinguishing

between some of the importantly different phenomena that might serve as natural referential candidates for three of the labels standardly used to refer to the intended feature ('for-me-ness', 'mineness', and 'a sense of mineness'). We argue that proponents of universality sometimes equivocate between these candidates in their use of these phrases, and that as a result they may be guilty of reading the plausibility of certain relatively modest claims into their more controversial commitments. We end the section by settling on an unambiguous statement of both the intended feature and universality.

Our second aim is to consider – and ultimately debunk – some of the ways in which universality has been motivated in recent analytic work. These motivations fall into two broad camps. First, *explanatory*. Here, the claim is that universality must be accepted because the intended feature explains a range of otherwise puzzling epistemological-cum-psychological phenomena associated with consciousness. Second, *descriptive* or *conceptual*. Here, the claim is that universality must be accepted because an adequate description or conception of conscious experience must represent it as involving the intended feature, prior to any theorising about it.¹ §2 considers motivations of the first sort; §3 the second.²

In all of this we restrict our discussion to the paradigm of conscious experience, namely conscious perception. If universality fails to hold in the domain of conscious perception, then *a fortiori* it fails to hold for conscious experience *per se*.

1 FEATURES OF PERCEPTUAL EPISODES

Here are some things that one might say when speaking about one's perceptual episodes:

I perceive the world; I see things, hear things, and so on. When I do, objects and their properties are present to me. They are present to me in experience.
I am the subject of the experiences in which these things are present to me.

So we have before us the notion of things being present to me in experience, or in experiences, of which I am the subject. These ordinary terms are ones on which we all have a grasp. We need not take any of them to be jargon, nor give any of them an implicitly jargonistic reading, in order to make sense of such speech.

Now, the phrases mentioned above—those used to pick out the intended feature—are not like that. They are unfamiliar to most. But they are not *pure* jargon, for they are in fact quite suggestive. And this makes sense: they were selected by those who employ

¹ The distinction between these two kinds of motivation is drawn in Zahavi and Kriegel (2015, p. 45). We discuss their paper below.

² Our aim therefore differs from those who seek to undermine universality via reflection on pathological or marginal cases of conscious experience. (See Billon and Kriegel 2015 for discussion of such strategies.) For we question whether there is a good case to be made for taking the intended feature to be ubiquitous even in ordinary conscious episodes.

them in part because they were taken to be phenomenologically apt. Still, unlike the ordinary language used in the indented passage above, these expressions require some unpacking if we are to get beyond mere suggestion. In §1.1 we focus on three of these expressions – ‘for-me-ness’, ‘mineness’, and ‘a sense of mineness’ – and in each case ask what features of perceptual episodes, as just characterised, might these phrases most naturally be used to pick out? The various features we identify are laid out in tables 1 (for ‘for-me-ness’, ‘mineness’), and 2 (for ‘a sense of mineness’). With these in hand, we’ll turn in §1.2 to some representative passages from proponents of universality, and ask which of them, if any, should we take the intended feature to be?

1.1 THREE LABELS

‘FOR-ME-NESS’. What might this phrase pick out? The first thing to note is that it must denote a *property*; that’s what the ‘-ness’ gets you. The second is that, in this context, talk of something being ‘for me’ connotes *presence*, and presence *to me*.³ It is that on which I have a conscious perspective—that which is present to me—that would most naturally be said to be there for me in a perceptual episode. The most natural denotation of ‘for-me-ness’ within an experiential situation of mine, then, is what we might call *object for-me-ness*: the property of *being present to me*. This is a property instantiated by the objects of my experiences, whenever they are indeed objects of my experience. So when I see a table, that table instantiates object for-me-ness; it has the property of being present to me.⁴

Another possible denotation for ‘for-me-ness’, slightly less natural but still reasonable, would be the other side of this coin, as it were. This we can call *experience for-me-ness*: the property of *being that in which something is present to me*, or, more simply, of *presenting something to me*.⁵ Within a perceptual episode of mine, this will be instantiated not by objects of my experiences, but by my experiences themselves. These are two sides of the same coin because if there is something that instantiates object for-me-ness—if there is something that is present to me—then there will be an experience that

³ In what follows, we shift between writing in the first person plural and the first person singular, for obvious reasons. We ask that the reader overlook the slightly awkward transitions.

⁴ ‘Objects of my experiences’ is here a quasi-technical term for anything that is indeed present to me in experience, whether it be an object (in the ordinary sense), an event, a state of affairs, a property, or anything else. We make no assumptions about what can figure in experience.

⁵ We must be careful with this admittedly very natural transition. The basic notion is that of something being present to one or to one’s mind, and it is this same notion that is at work when we speak of an experience *in which* something is present to one. But in speaking instead of an experience *presenting* something to one, we may seem to shift from treating ‘present’ as something two-place to treating it as something three-place, that is, from taking ‘*x* is present to *y*’ as canonical to taking ‘*z* presents *x* to *y*’ as canonical. The latter, then, should be understood at this point primarily in terms of the former; that is, as ‘*z* is that in which *x* is present to *y*’. This is not yet to rule out a conception of conscious presence which ultimately takes it to involve more than the subject and what is present to the subject; it is simply not to commit.

Phrase	Natural denotations		Instantiated by
'for-me-ness'	object for-me-ness	<i>being present to me</i>	objects of my experience
	experience for-me-ness	<i>presenting something to me</i>	my experiences
'mine-ness'	state/event mine-ness	<i>having me as its subject</i>	my experiences(/states/...)
	part mine-ness	<i>being a part of me/my body</i>	my parts/my body's parts

Table 1: '...-ness'

instantiates experience for-me-ness—an experience in which that thing is present to me. And vice versa.

'MINE-NESS'. Once again, the '-ness' indicates that we ought to be looking for a property. But to speak of something being 'mine' connotes, not presence, but rather *ownership* or *possession* or *belonging* or *having*. One property that it could naturally pick out, then, is what we might call *state/event mine-ness*: the property of *having me as its subject*. This will be instantiated not by the objects of my experience, but by my experiences themselves. (Note, though, that this property is not instantiated *only* by my experiences; it is instantiated by anything that has me as its subject in the relevant sense, including my physical states.)

Another natural denotation for 'mine-ness' would be what we might call *part mine-ness*: the property of *being a part of me/my body*. This, of course, will be instantiated by all and only those things that are part of me or my body.

These four properties are set out in Table 1. We have two observations to make about them before we move on.

The first is that all of these are subject specific. *Being present to me* is not the same property as *being present to you*; *presenting something to me* is not the same property as *presenting something to A* (assuming I am not A); and so on. (They are not, though, *first-personal* in any interesting sense, as this way of specifying the properties is transparent: in A's mouth, 'being present to me' picks out the same property as 'being present to A' does in anyone else's mouth.) Of course, we can also speak of the non-subject-specific properties that will be instantiated whenever one of these subject-specific properties is: *being present to someone*, *presenting something to someone*, *having someone as its subject*, and *being a part of someone/someone's body*. Or, indeed, of the relations out of which both the subject-specific and non-subject-specific relational properties are constructed: *being present to*, *presenting ... to*, *being the subject of*, and *being a part of*.

The second observation is that all of these properties must be, rather trivially, universally involved in my episodes of conscious perception. Which is to say, each will be

Phrase	Natural denotations
'a sense of for-me-ness'	awareness of an object of my experience being present to me awareness of an experience of mine presenting something to me
'a sense of mine-ness'	awareness of an experience of mine having me as its subject awareness of a part of me/my body being a part of me/my body

Table 2: 'a sense of ...-ness'

instantiated whenever I consciously perceive something. After all, my consciously perceiving something is simply a matter of something being present to me in experience. So in any episode of it, we have something being present to me, and an experience in which that thing is present that has me as its subject. And whenever I and my body exist, as we must when I perceive, we each will have parts.

We now move on to the third phrase, 'a sense of mine-ness'.

'A SENSE OF MINE-NESS.' To speak of 'a sense' of something, we take it, is to speak of awareness of that thing. But awareness of what? Well, in principle, *any* of the properties we have just identified are ones of which I could be aware. So we have the possibility of speaking of 'a sense of' any one of them. And it is clear what the resulting phrases would most naturally pick out: awareness of the relevant kind of thing instantiating the relevant property. 'A sense of mine-ness', then, ought to denote either awareness of state/event mine-ness—of (in the case of perceptual episodes) my experiences having me as their subject—or awareness of part mine-ness—of my parts (or body's parts) being parts of me (or my body). But, equally, we could speak of 'a sense of for-me-ness', which ought to denote either awareness of object for-me-ness—of objects of my experience being present to me—or awareness of experience for-me-ness—of my experiences presenting something to me. (It is perhaps notable that while proponents of universality speak of 'for-me-ness', 'mine-ness', and 'a sense of mine-ness', they do not in fact use the phrase 'a sense of for-me-ness'.) These are laid out on Table 2.

There are three important things to note about these awarenesses. The first is that they differ with respect to their targets, not only in that they target different properties, but also in that they target the different things that instantiate those properties. So whereas awareness of object for-me-ness is awareness of an *object* of my experience, and awareness of it having the property of being present to me, awareness of experience for-me-ness and awareness of state/event mine-ness are both awarenesses of an *experience* of mine, in the first case awareness of it having the property of presenting something to me, and in the second case awareness of it having the property of having me as its subject.

Awareness of part mine-ness is awareness of something else again, namely awareness of a *part* of me or my body, and awareness of it having the property *being a part of me/my body*.

The second thing to note is that, because the properties in question are subject specific, each form of awareness must be characterised in subject specific terms. This is not to say that the forms of awareness must be, or must be thought of as, first-personal or *de se* (although that would suffice.) It is just to say that each must be thought of as a form of awareness that in some sense encompasses the identity of a particular subject or individual. Of course, we can also speak of awareness of the non-subject-specific versions of these properties, identified above, and these forms of awareness will be characterised in subject-neutral terms.

The third and perhaps most important thing to note is that none of these forms of awareness is explicitly part of perceptual episodes as characterised at the start of this section. So whereas the properties in Table 1 are uncontroversially present whenever there is conscious perception, it is not trivial that any of the forms of awareness in Table 2 are present whenever there is conscious perception. And while each of these forms of awareness may well, in one way or another, feature in our mental lives, their universality is not simply a given.

In drawing these distinctions, we do not mean to suggest that all of these properties, or all of these forms of awareness, are independent. There are undoubtedly interesting relations and dependencies that hold between them. But if one speaks in a single breath of more than one of them, and in particular if one wants to shift from speaking of the properties in the first table to the forms of awareness in the second, one should be sure to justify the move by way of an argument.

1.2 SOME QUOTES

We have seen, then, that the most natural interpretations of the various terms we have been considering diverge. And yet, as we began by noting, they are typically used interchangeably. This invites a suspicion that the terminological profusion reflects a failure to adequately distinguish between what are in fact different aspects of conscious episodes. If that's right, then what should we most charitably take the intended feature to be? In what follows, we consider a number of passages from two leading proponents of universality illustrative of the terminological slippage characteristic of this literature. These examples reveal the potentially distorting effects of such equivocation. We end the section with an explicit characterisation of both the intended feature and of universality.

We take as our source material a recent paper by Zahavi and Kriegel (2015) entitled 'For-Me-Ness: What It Is and What It Is Not.'⁶ As a clarificatory position statement

⁶ Clearly, Zahavi and Kriegel use 'for-me-ness' as their primary phrase for the intended feature. But in this short article alone, we also find them using the phrases 'mineness', 'subjective givenness', 'pre-reflective self-consciousness', 'pre-reflective self-awareness' and 'sense of ownership' as alternative names for the fea-

from two prominent proponents of universality, it is a reasonable place to look to get a sense of when and how the intended feature is invoked. But our observations turn on nothing distinctive about this particular text; parallel points could be made with any of many recent examples.

Zahavi and Kriegel's canonical statement of their view is: "All conscious states' phenomenal character involves for-me-ness as an experiential constituent." (p. 37) We understand this claim as follows. The phenomenal character of an experience is or comprises a range of properties instantiated by that experience, namely those that contribute to (and collectively constitute) what it is like to have that experience. To characterise what it is like to have that experience is to identify and appropriately characterise these properties. Their claim is that the intended feature is among these properties for every conscious experience. But when we look at the way in which they elaborate their thesis, and the way in which they use the various labels that are supposed to refer to the intended feature, we encounter ambiguities and inconsistencies.

By way of illustration, consider the following pair of passages:

- (1) Our view is not that in addition to the objects in one's experiential field—the books, computer screen, half-empty cup of coffee, and so on—there is also a *self-object*. Rather the point is that each of these objects, when experienced, is given to one in a distinctively first-personal way, and that this givenness is a pervasive dimension of phenomenal life. (p. 38)
- (2) [...] once *anything* occurs consciously, it must be given to the subject and thus exhibit for-me-ness. (p. 38)

In both (1) and (2), Zahavi and Kriegel speak of something being given to a subject. But *what* is said to be given in each case differs. In (1), it is external objects that are said to be given, albeit in a particular way, and it is their being so given that is claimed to be a universal feature of conscious experience. In (2), it is that which 'occurs consciously'—namely, experiences themselves—that are said to be given, and indeed always to be given. And yet in both cases it is the ubiquity of the relevant items' givenness within the domain of conscious experience that is supposed to constitute Zahavi and Kriegel's central thesis.

Another pair:

- (3) [...] experience *presents* [...] features, in the sense of making *someone* phenomenally aware of them. To that extent, although all the presented items are worldly items, the presenting itself—presenting to someone—is an aspect of phenomenal consciousness as well. There is thus a minimal dimension of for-me-ness [...] (pp. 40–41)
- (4) Regardless of how alienated [a] patient feels vis-à-vis [an] experience, the experience does not manifest itself entirely in the public domain. It continues to be phenomenally present to the patient in a way that is, in principle, unavailable to others. (p. 45)

ture.

In (3) and (4), the talk is of presence rather than givenness. But as above, what is said to be present differs. In (3), it is worldly items. In (4), it is experiences themselves. And yet, again, it is in each case the ubiquity of the relevant items' presence that is supposed to constitute the central thesis.

Moreover, the phrase 'for-me-ness', their central label, is being used inconsistently in (3) and (2). While in both passages it is used to denote a property, and the property is being ascribed to experiences themselves, the property differs. In (3), it is (the non-subject-specific version of) what we called 'experience for-me-ness': the property *presenting something to someone*. But in (2), it appears to be the non-subject-specific property *being given to its subject*. (Juxtaposing (2) and (4) suggests that they take 'being given to' and 'being present to' to be equivalent, in which case this is the same property as *being present to its subject*.) But to predicate these properties of an experience is to say something quite different in each case. To say an experience presents something to someone is, at least in the case of perception, to say something relatively trivial; to say an experience is given or present to its subject, however, is to say something substantial.

Lest these complaints seem like so much churlish nitpicking, there is an important lesson to be drawn from them. For suppose we take 'for-me-ness' as a name for the property *being present/given to someone* (in accordance, perhaps, with (2) above.) Then the claim that conscious experience always involves for-me-ness is crucially ambiguous. On the first, relatively uncontroversial, reading, it is the claim that whenever there is a conscious experience, something is given to someone. On the second, more controversial, reading, it is the claim that every conscious experience is itself given to someone. If we fail to clearly and consistently distinguish these claims—something always being present or given in experience and experiences themselves always being present or given—then any plausibility apparent in the former is liable to create an illusion of plausibility for the latter.

Nevertheless, it is clearly the the latter, more controversial claim that proponents of universality intend to be advancing. This remains clear despite the fact that the phenomenon of worldly items being given or present to a subject is sometimes offered as illustrating the involvement of the intended feature. The lesson, then, is that we must be careful not to allow such slips to lend universality an unwarranted degree of plausibility. And we would suggest that this is a trap that proponents of universality have not entirely avoided.

So what should we take the intended feature and universality to be? There are various options. But ideally, we want to characterise them in such a way that the kind of ambiguity just identified cannot arise. So let us take it to be the property of *being an experience that is present or given to its subject*.⁷ And let us take universality to be the claim

⁷Zahavi and Kriegel also, at one point, characterise the intended feature as 'a sort of *minimum point* of self-consciousness'. (p. 44) (Cf. the phrases 'pre-reflective self-awareness' and 'intransitive self-consciousness' mentioned above.) This might be thought to generate yet another candidate for the in-

that every conscious experience instantiates this property.^{8,9}

We are now in a position to evaluate the motivations for universality. Above, we said that these motivations fall into two camps: either *explanatory* or *descriptive/conceptual*. We will address each camp in turn.

2 EXPLANATORY MOTIVATIONS

An explanatory case for universality must do two things: it must identify a universal property of experiences, and it must show that having this property is best explained by having the intended feature. In this section we consider three interrelated properties that have sometimes been taken to be explained by universality. These concern the immunity to error through misidentification of experiential self-ascriptions, the epistemic asymmetry between first and third personal access to experiences, and the ease with which we are able to report on our occurrent experiences. In each case we will grant that the relevant property is universal, but argue that the intended feature is not needed to explain what needs explaining.¹⁰

tended feature: *being an experience in which the subject of that experience is given to itself*. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for reminding us of this.) We suspect that 'self-consciousness' (or 'self-awareness') here is being used to mean something like 'awareness of experience', rather than 'awareness of subject'—a very common, if potentially misleading, usage. If so, then this characterisation does not in fact generate the extra candidate for the intended feature just mentioned, and so there is no extra equivocation here. But even if such equivocation does occur, it seems clear enough that it does not play the same kind of role in generating undue plausibility for universality, and hence is not deserving of the same kind of scrutiny as the uses discussed in the text.

⁸ Note that this formulation of the intended feature permits of an ambiguity if universality is not appropriately formulated. For there is a distinction to be drawn between the claim that every conscious experience involves the instantiation of this property and the claim that every conscious experience instantiates this property. The former (in principle) allows that there could be an experience e_1 of an experience e_2 where only e_2 instantiates the intended feature. The latter does not. Even specifying that the intended feature is involved in every experience's phenomenal character, as Kriegel and Zahavi do, does not resolve the ambiguity. For e_1 may present e_2 having the property. There is no way, as far as we can see, to formulate the feature so as to avoid this. As such, universality must always be stated in terms of experiences instantiating the property, not merely involving it. Proponents of universality tend to avoid this ambiguity in their canonical statements, but are not always so careful in discussion.

⁹ Despite superficial similarities, this view is to be sharply distinguished from claims of the sort advanced by those who defend higher-order theories of consciousness. (See Carruthers 2011, and references therein.) While such theorists claim that every phenomenally conscious experience is one of which the subject is 'aware', they adopt a distinct and revisionary notion of awareness from the one at work in the text, according to which a subject can be said to be non-consciously aware of something—aware of something without it figuring in that subject's perspective. Universality is the claim that every experience is one of which the subject is *consciously* aware—that every experience figures in its subject's conscious point of view.

¹⁰ A recent example of someone who has argued along similar lines is Schear (2009).

2.1 IMMUNITY TO ERROR THROUGH MISIDENTIFICATION

Every conscious experience is such that an experiential self-ascription, when made on the sole basis of undergoing that experience, will be immune to error through misidentification relative to its first personal component. This is the first explanandum we will consider. Immunity to error through misidentification is a modal property of some judgments, conferred onto them by their mode of formation. Specifically, a judgment *a is F*, made on grounds *g*, is immune to error through misidentification relative to *a* just in case it would not be possible in judging that *a is F* on *g* to know that *something* is *F* on those grounds, but make a mistake solely in virtue of being wrong through a misidentification in judging that it is *a* that is *F*.¹¹

Let's take an example. Suppose that on the basis of a visual experience I judge that I am seeing a canary. My judgment might have gone wrong in all sorts of more or less interesting ways. It can't, however, be wrong in the following way. I can't be right in judging solely on the basis of that experience that *someone* is seeing a canary, but wrong in thinking (on those same grounds) that it's me. This is, of course, only an illustrative example; but we take it that the same will hold of all other experience-based self-ascriptions. So we arrive at the universal claim that any experiential self-ascription made on the sole basis of an experience is immune to error through misidentification relative to its first personal component. How might universality explain this datum?

One writer who has recently argued that it does is Shaun Gallagher. He suggests that no matter how else an experience might be disrupted, 'I nonetheless have the sense that I am experiencing these things' (p.203), and so claims that 'the true anchor for IEM is the self-specific first-person perspective that characterizes every experience.' (p.211) In less picturesque terms, the idea might be something like this. Episodes of visual perception are open in a number of ways to either pathological distortion or artificial manipulation.¹² According to Gallagher, however, there is one property had by all such episodes, and it is this property that ensures the immunity to error through misidentification of self-ascriptive judgments formed on the sole basis of the related experience. That is, no matter how else a visual experience might depart from a veridical visual perception, the subject *cannot fail to be aware of the experience itself*, and moreover to be *aware of it having herself as its subject*.¹³ If this is right, he seems to suggest, then no matter how else a self-

¹¹ There are active debates in the literature on immunity to error through misidentification concerning its correct formulation, and the question whether such formulations should be made to respect significant distinctions between different kinds of error through misidentification — for some recent examples of these discussions, see the collected papers in (Prosser and Recanati 2012). We take this to be a fairly orthodox formulation based on Shoemaker's original characterisation in his (1968), but with the standard revisions of relativisation to grounds and framed in terms of judgments rather than statements.

¹² See Gallagher 2012 for some of these varieties of perceptual distortion.

¹³ This last qualification makes Gallagher's view more specific than universality as we have defined it, in that he commits to a certain property of every experience being given to that experience's subject. But this claim implies the weaker claim that every experience is given to its subject; it is effectively a stronger

ascription of undergoing an experience might be mistaken when made on the sole basis of having the experience — no matter what other experiential disturbances get taken up into the judgment — there is one way in which the judgment is perfectly epistemically secure. The subject cannot be mistaken through a misidentification in judging that it is she herself who is undergoing the experience, since through it all she was aware of the experience as her own.

Thus a particular form of awareness of experiences is taken to explain the universal property of conscious experiences of being such that whenever a subject makes an experiential self-ascription on the sole basis of undergoing an experience, she cannot be wrong solely through a misidentification that she is the experience's subject. To put it in first personal terms: I can't be wrong under such conditions in judging the experience to be mine, because throughout the experiential episode I am unfailingly aware of it having me as its subject.

The problem with this explanation is that it misses its mark. We will first say why an explanation of the immunity to error through misidentification datum need not appeal to universality. We will then say something about why Gallagher and others might have thought that it does.

What *does* explain the immunity to error through misidentification of all experiential self-ascriptions, if not awareness of experiences? Quite simply, that if I judge anything on the sole basis of φ -ing, then I must be φ -ing. So I cannot be wrong in judging, on that basis, that I am φ -ing. That is, only experiences of mine could form the sole basis for a judgment of mine — so if I form a self-ascriptive judgment on the sole basis of undergoing an experience of some kind, then it is impossible that I could have gone wrong in having judged myself to have undergone an experience of that kind. The only property of experiences we need appeal to, in the terms of §1.1, is state/event mine-ness, the property of *having me as its subject*. We need say nothing about my experiences being present to me to get this explanation off the ground. So Gallagher's explanation misses its mark; it appeals to a stronger claim than is needed to explain what needs explaining.

It is nevertheless easy to feel that Gallagher was on to something, and we want to say a few words about why we think this is. The pull of his explanation, we think, comes from a running together of two neighbouring kinds of question. One sort of question we might ask is: is it possible, when an experiential self-ascription is formed on the basis of undergoing an experience, that the judgment could be wrong about who the experiential predicate is known to apply to? This is a bona fide question about immunity to error through misidentification, and we have seen that all we need to answer it is a reminder of the fact that all and only the experiences that I undergo are mine. If I have formed an experiential self-ascription on the sole basis of undergoing an experience, then it is guaranteed that the experience is one of my own. So I cannot be mistaken solely through a misidentification in judging myself to be having the sort of experience I thereby take it

version of universality.

to be.

Another sort of question we might be interested in is: when is a subject in a position to make a knowledgable self-ascription on the basis of undergoing an experience? Or: so long as one forms a judgment about an experience at all, under what conditions could one fail to self-ascribe it?¹⁴ Whatever it is we are asking here, we are not asking about the immunity to error through misidentification of the relevant judgments. These, rather, are questions about our self-ascriptive behaviours, about the production of first person judgments. And, of course, facts about one's awareness of one's experiences might well be relevant in answering them. But unless there is a universal property of experiences in the vicinity — and we do not see any plausible candidates — then there is no explanatory case here for *universal* awareness of experiences.¹⁵

We turn now to the second potential explanandum, the phenomenon of epistemic asymmetry.

2.2 EPISTEMIC ASYMMETRY

A second universal feature of conscious experience is that they are always accessible in a more direct way to their subjects than to anyone else. Something like this feature is sometimes taken to be explained by universality. In their joint encyclopedia entry on the topic, for instance, Gallagher and Zahavi write:

Although two people, A and B, can perceive a numerically identical object, they each have their own distinct perceptual experience of it; just as they cannot share each other's pain, they cannot literally share these perceptual experiences. Their experiences are epistemically asymmetrical in this regard. [...] The subject's epistemic access to her own experience, whether it is a pain or a perceptual experience, is primarily a matter of pre-reflective self-awareness.

(Gallagher and Zahavi 2016, §1)

This passage gestures at an explanatory connection between the intended feature (here called 'pre-reflective self-awareness') and the privileged epistemic access that we each

¹⁴ There is evidence that Gallagher is, at least sometimes, moved by this second kind of question rather than the first. In comparing his construal of immunity to error through misidentification to the nearby phenomenon of guaranteed self-reference, he writes, 'IEM mirrors guaranteed self-reference, so to speak, but is more basic because it is based on the first-person perspective *that allows me to generate* first-person *as-subject* statements' (p.204, first emphasis added).

¹⁵ An adjacent diagnostic point concerns the somewhat delicate relation between the state/event mine-ness explanation of universal immunity to error through misidentification of experiential self-ascriptions on the one hand, and facts about our awareness of our experiences on the other. It may well be true that to form an experiential self-ascription on the sole basis of an experience implies awareness of that experience. But that they come together in this way should not mislead us into thinking that the second kind of fact is needed to explain the first.

have to our own experiences.¹⁶ In one form or another, we find this connection posited under various guises in Levine, Kriegel, and Zahavi.¹⁷ In what follows we focus on a particular argument by Kriegel given in Chapter 2 of *Subjective Consciousness*. The stated aim of Kriegel's argument is the vindication of research programs targeting phenomenal consciousness. But he does this by giving an explanatory argument for universality.

The explanandum, as Kriegel construes it, is the universal property of conscious experiences of being *access conscious* (in Ned Block's terminology): the property of being 'poised for free use in reasoning and for direct 'rational' control of action and speech' (Block 1995, p. 382). So understood, access consciousness gives us a way of characterising more sharply the asymmetry between my epistemic standing with respect to my experiences and yours; those experiences are poised for free and direct use in reasoning and action in my own case, and not in yours.

Kriegel's argument begins by registering that access consciousness is a dispositional property of experiences. He writes, '[n]othing has actually to happen with a mental state or event for it to qualify as access-conscious: the state or event need not actually be accessed; it needs only to be accessible.' (p. 37) Dispositional properties, however, are not explanatorily basic; they must be grounded in non-dispositional categorical properties. By way of illustration, Kriegel invites us to consider the case of fragility:

The glass is fragile — it is disposed to break under relatively lax conditions — *because*, or *in virtue of*, its physico-chemical constitution. Its particular constitution is thus the *reason for* its fragility — the reason *why* it is fragile. In this sense, the glass's physico-chemical constitution is the categorical basis of the glass's fragility. (p. 37)

Likewise, since access consciousness is a dispositional property we must find a categorical property that will serve as its basis — '[w]hen a mental state is access-conscious, it must also have a categorical property *in virtue of which* it is access-conscious' (p. 37). What could that be? Kriegel offers a candidate:

A natural suggestion is [...] for-me-ness or subjective character. [...] The reason why a mental state is posed for the subject's free use in personal-level reasoning and action control, it is reasonable to suppose, is that the subject is already aware of it. (p.38)

It is because all experiences are already given to their subjects (and to no one else) that they are access conscious within their own subjects' mental lives (and no one else's). The

¹⁶ There might seem to be a quick response here for proponents of universality — namely, that the sense in which a subject has special access to her own experiences just is that they are present to her. Notice, though, that this is *too* quick: an explanatory case for universality must identify a universal property *other than the intended feature* that's best explained by it. To put things this way would effectively be to posit universality itself as the explanandum. And nothing explains itself.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Levine 2001, 2006, Kriegel 2009b, ch. 2, Zahavi 2005, esp. chs. 1 & 5.

universality of the intended feature thus explains the universality of access consciousness. This is where our present interest in the argument ends, but Kriegel takes it a step further. This conclusion, he thinks, vindicates research into phenomenal consciousness: the intended feature is, on his view, a constitutive component of phenomenal consciousness. This means that a constitutive component of phenomenal consciousness is given as the most plausible categorical basis for access consciousness. Insofar as we are interested in understanding access consciousness, then, it is possible that we will be able to do so by studying phenomenal consciousness.

We think that there are two problems with this argument — the second more serious than the first. The first is a worry about the limited scope of the epistemic asymmetry that emerges from this picture. It is intuitively compelling to think that the range of mental states that forms the first personal side of the epistemic asymmetry outstrips the realm of phenomenal consciousness. My non-occurrent beliefs, for example, or my dispositional preferences, desires, intentions and their like, seem to be access conscious. But there is surely nothing it is like for me to believe, without bringing to mind, that it is over 27 miles to Cork, or to be disposed to choose the boot in Monopoly, or to want cake when I see it. These are not phenomenally conscious states. So long as we understand the categorical basis of access consciousness to be a constitutive component of phenomenal consciousness, however, then we will have to let drop these initial intuitions and exclude those states from the reach of access consciousness.¹⁸

There are at least two ways of responding to this objection, both of which Kriegel seems to incline towards in different places. The first is a bullet-biting response. On the nearby topic of first person authority, Kriegel and Zahavi insist that, '[e]xperiential for-me-ness *determines* the sphere of what we may have first person authority about' (2015, p. 11); we have first person authority only over the states that 'we consciously live through' (p. 11). Whatever we make of the relationship between first person authority and access consciousness, it's clearly open to Kriegel to take a similar stand on access consciousness. Phenomenal consciousness, the idea might be, determines the sphere of access consciousness, so we must simply accept that only the states we consciously live through are access conscious. This position strikes us as implausible, but beyond this point we have little more to offer than intuition-trading.

The second response is to allow for a plurality of categorical bases grounding the phenomenon of access consciousness. Perhaps a constitutive feature of phenomenal consciousness categorically grounds only *some* instances of the dispositional property, and we must look elsewhere to explain others. In *Subjective Consciousness* Kriegel is explicit

¹⁸ Some might claim that such a state is only access conscious when it, or some corresponding cognitive episode, is phenomenally conscious. Such a claim would go well beyond an (already controversial) commitment to the existence of cognitive phenomenology, and we would be highly skeptical of a view of this kind. However, we will not engage with this claim in the present paper. (For discussion of cognitive phenomenology, see the essays in Bayne and Montague 2011.)

in allowing this option¹⁹:

[T]he functional role occupied by the categorical basis is, like other functional roles, multiply realizable: it allows different occupants to play the exact same role. In similar fashion, access consciousness could readily occur in the absence of its actual categorical basis — if some other categorical properties served as its basis. (p.42, n.35)

This weakening is surely to be welcomed. There is considerable plausibility to the idea that the explanation of access consciousness will in some cases make mention of the fact that there is something it is like for me to be in the relevant state, even if cases of access consciousness to, say, non-occurrent beliefs are to be explained in other ways. But as soon as we proliferate categorical bases in this way, the argument for the universality of the intended feature begins to look less than complete. If there can be many grounding explanations for the phenomenon of access consciousness, then we will need an extra reason to posit a homogenous explanation for all cases of conscious experience — as we must if this argument is to provide an explanatory case for universality. Perhaps that extra reason could come from considerations of theoretical virtue: elegance, for example, or parsimony. Our point is only that *something* is now needed to complete the argument.

The second problem with this argument is less easy to shake off. That is, that Kriegel's account of access consciousness doesn't help to explain the broader explanandum of epistemic asymmetry; all it does is push the explanatory demand back a level. All conscious experiences are access conscious to their subjects, for Kriegel, *because their subjects were already aware of them*. This might, strictly speaking, account for the access consciousness of these states — for their free and direct availability in personal-level reasoning and action guidance. But it does so only by appealing to the subjects' *pre-existing* access to those states. So the question is merely moved to an earlier point in the account: what explains the epistemic asymmetry between first personal and third personal access to conscious states in the first place? Of course, addressing this broader explanandum was no part of Kriegel's stated aim in the passages we have been discussing. But the worry can be put independently of Kriegel's argument. Generally speaking, how could the the intended feature explain the asymmetry between first and third personal access to conscious experiences?

The answer cannot be that the intended feature ensures that conscious experiences are always present to their subjects. That is, if you like, a way of describing the nature of the access that subjects have to their experiences. But it doesn't explain what needs

¹⁹ It might be noted in other places he seems less open to this option, or at least to take himself to be in the position of needing to be convinced otherwise: 'In the case of access consciousness, it is hard to see what other categorical basis it might have [...]. In any case, until another potential categorical basis is adduced, we should be entitled to proceed on the assumption that subjective character is the *only* categorical basis of access consciousness — that it is not only *a* categorical basis but *the* categorical basis.' (Kriegel 2009b, p. 39)

explaining, which is why it is that I have that kind of access to these conscious states and not those, and you to those and not these. To explain that asymmetry, we must appeal to the fact that these are *my* conscious experiences, and those are *yours*; we must appeal, in other words, to state/event mine-ness. This is not to say that we might not want to supplement this picture with a characterisation of the access that we each have to our own experiences, once we have so divided them between mine and yours using the property of state/event mine-ness. And something like this characterisation is what the intended feature supplies. But the point is that it cannot be what explains the initial epistemic asymmetry datum — universality is compatible with epistemic asymmetry, but it cannot be explanatorily motivated by it.

2.3 EASE OF JUDGMENT AND REPORTABILITY

The third explanandum we want to consider is the apparent ease with which experiencing subjects are able to form judgments about, or to report on, the experiences they are occurrently undergoing.²⁰ There is no question of my having to stop and deliberate if prompted to form a judgment about my current experiences — other things being equal I am always ready to pronounce with ease on what I am experiencing, at least under some description of the experience. The *ceteris paribus* qualification here is included to filter out factors external to the experience itself that could block uptake into a judgment about the experience, such as repressive psychological mechanisms or neurophysiological abnormalities. We include the ‘under some description’ qualification to rule out overly demanding readings of this explanandum, on which I am always in a position to judge and to report in full detail on every aspect of my experience. So understood, we think that this is plausibly a universal property of conscious experiences. The question is, is it best explained by universality?

For Zahavi and others, it is. According to universality all experiences are present to their subjects. This means that even before being called upon to form a judgment or report about an experience, the subject is already aware of it. This awareness grants her familiarity with the experience that makes it conspicuously easy, when the time comes, to judge or to say what it is she is experiencing. Thus Zahavi writes:

[I]t is because I am pre-reflectively conscious of my experiences that I am usually able to respond immediately, that is, without inference or observation, if somebody asks me what I have been doing, or thinking, or seeing, or feeling immediately prior to the question. (2005, p. 21)

Variations of the argument by different writers come in different strengths and tones. In what we take to be its strongest light the argument has abductive force: the best explanation of the ease with which we are able to form judgments about and to report on our

²⁰ See Schear 2009, pp. 102–104 for a different argument against this explanatory motivation.

occurrent experiences posits universal awareness of experiences.²¹

The problem with explaining this universal feature of conscious experience by appeal to universality, we think, is that such an explanation mislocates the explanatory target. What needs explaining is the ease with which occurrent experiences are taken up into the level of reflective judgment or report. What proponents of the above argument give us is the claim that all experiences are already present to their subjects. But in this they remain silent about how these experiences (that are always present to their subjects) are transformed into self-ascriptive experiential judgments or reports — the ease of which process was what needed explaining. Universality, in other words, is an answer to a different question. Put it this way: we might conceive of creatures whose conscious experiences are stipulatively always given to their subjects, but whose specific cognitive architecture nevertheless makes the transition from conscious experience to experiential self-ascription a psychologically laborious one. To say that experiences are always given to their subjects, even by stipulation, does not answer the question how those experiences are converted into self-ascriptive judgments. And, more importantly, it does not say why the process by which that happens is an easy one.

This is not to say that it is incompatible with the positing of such a mechanism that its operational details—once we know more about them—will require the ‘input’ experiences to have had the intended feature, but it is also compatible to say that they won’t. It might turn out, for instance, that a proper understanding of the psychological process by which we make these transitions between experience and experiential self-ascription will reveal that our cognitive structures have evolved in a way that permits psychologically fluid transitions between a first-order experience and its self-attribution without any mediation via conscious awareness of the experience.²² This is just to say that the fact that there must be such a psychological mechanism to explain the ease datum is no evidence yet one way or another on the question whether its input experiences must have already been present to the subject.

Once the details have been worked out it might also turn out that this mechanism will appeal to the fact that the starting experiences are phenomenally conscious. Indeed, we think that much seems likely. But this will not advance proponents of universality very far. A commitment to phenomenal consciousness playing a central explanatory role in an account of a given epistemic or psychological feature of experience moves entirely independently from a commitment to understanding phenomenal consciousness in terms of universal experiential awareness. One can very well accept that phenomenal consciousness will feature essentially in our best explanations of a range of such features without thereby incurring any obligation to understand phenomenal consciousness one way or another. So there is no independent argument here that has (any form of) univer-

²¹ See, e.g., Kriegel 2009a, p. 376, Gallagher and Zahavi 2016, and Zahavi 2009 pp. 305–306, for examples of different presentations of the argument.

²² Cf., e.g., Evans 1982, sec.7.4, Peacocke 2001 and Récanati 2007.

salinity as its conclusion.

To summarise, the basic complaint is that universality — understood in its broadest terms as the claim that all experiences are present to their subjects — falls short of explaining what needs explaining. Even with universality in place, it is a further task to say how conscious experiences are taken up into self-ascriptive experiential judgments or reports. It is worth pointing out, however, that the specific version of universality invoked above by Zahavi admits of a specific version of this problem. We saw in the quote above that the relevant awareness of experiences for Zahavi is ‘pre-reflective’. Something similar is true of the versions of universality taken by Kriegel and Gallagher to explain this ease datum too. Gallagher, for instance, writes that:

[W]hat makes my thoughts accessible in reflective introspection is precisely an already operating *pre-reflective* self-awareness that is part of the concurrent structure of any conscious process. (Gallagher 2012, p. 189, emphasis added)

And Kriegel that:

[I]ntrospecting feels more like a phenomenologically light shifting around of attention than like a dramatic mental act that produces a completely new awareness. [...] This may be taken to constitute phenomenological evidence that prior to the introspecting, there was already inner awareness of the conscious experience, *albeit peripheral* (Kriegel 2009a, p. 376, emphasis added)

where peripheral awareness is to be understood as non-focal awareness.²³

For these writers the awareness of experiences that explains the ease with which self-ascriptive experiential judgments are formed is pre-reflective or -attentive awareness. But to form an introspective judgment about her experiences, a subject must reflect or attend to them — this difference between pre-reflective awareness and introspective awareness of experiences looms large in the accounts of all three of these writers.²⁴ But the problem can now be put like this. The explanatory datum of this section is the ease with which we are able to move from having experiences to forming reflective judgments about them. If — along with Zahavi, Kriegel and Gallagher — we posit universal pre-reflective awareness of experiences, then the explanatory response to this datum will be an account of the (easy) process by which pre-reflective experiential awareness is exploited in introspective judgment. Otherwise, our response will be an account of the (easy) process by which our first-order experiences are exploited in introspective judgment. Either way, what is called for is an account of the relevant process. And that call does not prejudice what its inputs will be.²⁵

²³ Kriegel 2009a, p. 360; like Gallagher and Zahavi, Kriegel also elsewhere talks about this awareness as ‘pre-reflective’.

²⁴ See, e.g. Zahavi and Kriegel 2015, p. 40; Gallagher and Zahavi 2016, §1; Gallagher 2012, p. 189; Kriegel 2009a, §4; Levine 2001, p. 4.

²⁵ The most fully developed account of this process we have found is in Kriegel 2009a; ‘introspecting

3 DESCRIPTIVE MOTIVATIONS

We have argued against several explanatory cases for universality. But it is sometimes claimed that even if universality isn't explanatorily mandatory, it is nevertheless *descriptively* mandatory. Consider, for instance, the following passage from Zahavi and Kriegel:

Before we can assess the explanatory potency of any posit, we must have a grasp of some phenomena in need of explanation. Presumably this means that *some* phenomena would have to be accepted as real independently of their own explanatory potency. [...] Given this, rejecting the existence of for-me-ness requires showing not only that citing for-me-ness is useless and/or unnecessary for *explaining* the phenomena, but also that it is useless and/or unnecessary for *describing* the phenomena. But in our opinion, it is impossible to correctly *describe* the structure of phenomenal consciousness without citing for-me-ness. (2015, p. 45)

In this section we turn to this second kind of motivation for universality. A word first, though, on what such a descriptive — or, more precisely perhaps, *conceptual* — case amounts to.

Kriegel and Zahavi begin this passage with the idea that inquiry into the explanatory usefulness of a thing must begin with some intuitive grasp of what the inquiry is about, a pre-theoretical conception of the object of inquiry. The passage ends with the claim that when it comes to the case of conscious experience, a complete articulation of our pre-theoretical conception must include mention of the intended feature. Our naive grasp of the phenomenon of conscious experiences is as of mental items that are present to their subjects. But is this right?

It is widely accepted that the best basic articulation of our naive conception of conscious experiences is provided by the Nagelian phrases with which we began — that the subjectivity, or subjective character of experience is captured by talk of 'there being something it is like for a subject', or 'what it is like for a subject to have an experience'. For proponents of universality, the important bit of these phrases — the bit that captures the *subjective character* of experience — is the 'for a subject' bit. It's this part of the phrase that emphasises the idea of a subject's perspective, or point of view, an idea that really does seem to be built in to our naive conception of conscious experience. This seems

one's current experience does not involve entering a completely new representational state. Rather, it involves reorganizing the center/periphery structure of one's overall experience, by transforming one's peripheral inner awareness of one's current experience into a focal one.' (p. 372) This account is given in the service of defending universality against the objection that such universal awareness of experiences would be, but is not, introspectively manifest. On his model of introspection this is to be expected; 'introspecting cannot reveal peripheral inner awareness because it *annihilates* it (by supplanting it)'. (p. 373). Although he spends several pages on this point, however, he does not directly address our concern, which is to say *how* — in his terms — the center/periphery structure of one's experience becomes reorganised, and why we should expect this transformation to be effortless. This is hardly surprising given his different focus in these passages.

right. And drawing attention to the importance of the subject's perspective certainly seems to be part of what Nagel takes himself to be doing with these phrases.²⁶

The notion of a subject's point of view, we take it, is the notion of a point of view *on something*; the notion of something figuring in the subject's conscious perspective. We also take it that for something to figure in a subject's conscious perspective is for that thing to be present to the subject. This is plausibly the basic notion at work in our naive conception of conscious experience — of a conscious experience as an event of something being present to a subject. This is surely something with which proponents of universality will agree, for it is this same basic notion of something being present to the subject that they use to articulate their distinctive interpretation of Nagel's phrases. Specifically, their claim is that when we speak of 'what it is like for me to undergo an experience', the 'for me' part of this phrase captures the fact that *the experience itself* is present to me. It is by understanding Nagel's phrases this way — as implying a subject's point of view on her own experiences — that proponents of universality vindicate the idea that it is impossible to fully and correctly describe the structure of phenomenal consciousness in line with our pre-theoretical conception of it without citing the intended feature. This is the cornerstone of the descriptive case for universality.

There is, we think, a missing step here. The step is between the demand for presence, and demand for presence of experiences. According to proponents of universality, we do justice to the idea of a subject having a point of view by saying that an experience is present to that subject. But then how can we fail to do justice to the idea of a subject having a point of view when we employ the same notion of presence, but say that some *worldly* item is present to that subject? What matters here, surely, is the notion of presence itself — the relation between the subject and that which figures in their point of view. And our naive conception clearly does not *restrict* what can figure in a point of view to experiences. But given this, there seems to be no conceptual problem or incoherence in the notion of a point of view in which *only* worldly items figure.²⁷

²⁶ See esp. pp. 437–8, 441–5. Cf. Martin 1998, p. 173 and Hoerl 2015.

²⁷ Levine (2006), while advocating universality, seems to recognise the missing step. In order to motivate the claim that it is experiences that must be present to the mind, he offers a one-paragraph invocation of the argument from hallucination. (p. 180) The thought being: *something* must be present to the mind in conscious experience. Because hallucinations are possible, it cannot be anything non-experiential. Therefore experiences are present to the mind in conscious experience. But there are two points to make about this. One is that this is not a *conceptual* motivation for universality. The conceptual motivation will merely be for universal *presence* (of something or other) in conscious experience. The grounds for taking it to be *experiences* will be broadly speaking explanatory. (We do not suggest that Levine thinks otherwise.) And second, it is far from clear exactly what implications the argument from hallucination should be taken to have. For detailed discussion, see, e.g., Martin 2004, 2006.

4 CONCLUSION

We end with three take-home messages. The first is that we need to take particular care, when discussing the nature of consciousness, to use phenomenologically suggestive phrases in clear and consistent ways, so as to avoid distorting philosophical claims made in their terms. It's not clear that proponents of universality have entirely avoided this danger. The second is that, given a careful formulation of the intended feature, we find no compelling explanatory case to be made for universality. And the third is that while the notion of something being present to a subject plays an essential role in our naive conception of consciousness, the notion of *experiences* being present does not. What, then, is in conscious experience 'for me'? Simply: whatever it is that is present to me.

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