

# Ordinary Self-Consciousness as Philosophical Problem

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## §1. Two Senses of ‘Self-Conscious’

In ‘The First Person’, Anscombe (1981a, p. 25) distinguishes two senses of ‘self-conscious’. First came the philosophical notion, which arose in seventeenth century philosophy and which refers to the special form of consciousness one has of oneself, *as oneself*, as opposed to the variety of ways in which one can figure in the mind of another. Gradually, this term entered ordinary usage in an altered form, which Anscombe describes as meaning roughly ‘the awkwardness from being troubled by the feeling of being an object of observation by other people.’ This is the ordinary notion, which we employ when we speak of ‘feeling self-conscious’, and which forms the topic of this paper.

Anscombe suggests that the ordinary notion is ‘pretty irrelevant’ to the philosophical notion. Unsurprisingly, given this verdict, the ordinary notion has received little further consideration by analytic philosophers. Though it will be the burden of this paper to show that this neglect is unfortunate, I think it is understandable. Why, one might fairly wonder, are we in need of a philosophical theory of ordinary self-consciousness? Even if we acknowledge that it is an interesting and distinctive feature of our nature as self-conscious social animals, we might still wonder where there is anything about it that calls for *philosophical* investigation in particular. What does a

philosopher have to offer from the armchair which couldn't be said with greater authority by a psychologist or an anthropologist? To such worries it can be tempting to reply that for a psychologist to so much as address this topic, they must begin from a preliminary grasp of ordinary self-consciousness, from a description of what it's like, and that this is something that the philosopher is well-placed to provide. But, if my own experience is anything to go by, it is hard not to empathise with the sceptic to some extent. What, if anything, is philosophically interesting about this feeling which can otherwise seem so commonplace? Is there anything puzzling about ordinary self-consciousness?

I think there is. In this paper I hope to show that ordinary self-consciousness calls for philosophical understanding, and that, by answering this call, we are led to acknowledge a form of intersubjective relation that has been overlooked in recent discussions of interpersonal self-consciousness. My argument is as follows. I begin with a description of ordinary self-consciousness, which emphasises the idea that it constitutes a *sui generis* form of disruption to the subject's activity (§2). The experience of feeling self-conscious before another, I argue, cannot be understood in terms of either of the forms of intersubjective relation standardly acknowledged in the philosophical literature. That is, it cannot be understood reductively, in terms of the ontologically antecedent mental states of each subject, nor can it be understood in terms of an irreducible 'second person relation' (§3). Instead, I argue that in order to understand the phenomenological structure of ordinary self-consciousness, we must acknowledge the Sartrean insight that when I experience another's gaze, I experience it as *acting upon me* and I am conscious of myself as thereby being *acted upon*, in such a way that what the other is doing to me and what I thereby am undergoing are aspects of an irreducible 'interpersonal transaction' (§4).

## §2. What is ‘Ordinary Self-Consciousness’?

### 2.1 ‘Ordinary’ and ‘Philosophical’ Self-Consciousness

When we describe someone as feeling self-conscious, we describe them as undergoing an experience in which they are conscious of themselves *as themselves* in a particular kind of way. Any manifestation of ordinary self-consciousness will therefore be a manifestation of ‘self-consciousness’ in the philosophical sense. The ordinary notion is specifically different from the philosophical notion, however, in that it involves the subject being affected by another person. As a basis for further discussion, consider a scene from Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss* in which Lucy introduces Stephen, her fiancé, to the protagonist of the novel, Maggie:

Stephen became quite brilliant in an account of Buckland’s treatise, which he had just been reading. He was rewarded by seeing Maggie let her work fall and gradually get so absorbed in his wonderful geological story that she sat looking at him, leaning forward with crossed arms and with an entire absence of self-consciousness, as if he had been the snuffiest of old professors and she a downy-lipped alumnus. He was so fascinated by this clear, large gaze that at last he forgot to look away from it occasionally towards Lucy: but she, sweet child, was only rejoicing that Stephen was proving to Maggie how clever he was, and that they would certainly be good friends after all. ‘I will bring you the book, shall I, Miss Tulliver?’ said Stephen, when he found the stream of his recollections running rather shallow. ‘There are many illustrations in it that you will like to see.’

‘Oh thank you,’ said Maggie, blushing with returning self-consciousness at this direct address, and taking up her work again.  
(Eliot 2003a, p. 396)<sup>1</sup>

First, we might paraphrase Sartre (2018, p. 309) and say that to feel self-conscious is, in part, to be conscious of *oneself* before *another*. When I feel self-conscious I’m conscious of myself as being the actual (or potential) object of another’s attention, and I thereby experience the other as being actively oriented around me in some way (or potentially so oriented).<sup>2</sup> Maggie, for example, is acutely aware of herself as being the object of Stephen’s attention. But I might also experience another as attending to me insofar as they are actively and attentively ignoring me. As Pippin (2005, p. 584) observes, ‘in the conventional, everyday sense, no one is more aware of another than when one is trying to ignore that person’. In *Middlemarch* Mr. Farebrother notices with characteristic astuteness that though Rosamund did not once look towards her husband Dr. Lydgate during the dinner-party, she was nevertheless ‘intensely aware of Lydgate’s voice and movements’, and ‘her pretty good-tempered air of unconsciousness’, was, in reality, a ‘studied negation’ (Eliot 2003b, p. 642). It is natural to imagine this as being visible in Rosamund’s face and overall manner in such a way that, if Lydgate were to notice it, it might make him feel self-conscious.

## 2.2. *Self-Conscious Social Anxiety*

When I feel self-conscious before another’s gaze, I experience their gaze as disrupting my activity in a special kind of way. This is central to the feeling of self-consciousness and is highlighted in the example from *The Mill on the*

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<sup>1</sup> I’m indebted to O’Brien (2011) for this example.

<sup>2</sup> Though I focus on the case of feeling self-conscious before another’s gaze, we must remember that the blind can feel (and make others feel) self-conscious. Though much of what I say will apply to these cases, it is plausible that the interpersonal experiences of the blind will be distinctive in important ways and therefore deserving of their own independent treatment. For some insightful observations on this theme, see Hull (1990, pp. 47-9).

*Floss*, which begins with Maggie's absorption in Stephen's speech. Consider this in light of Ryle's (1954, p. 143) elaboration of the metaphorical force of the term 'absorption': just as the blotting paper absorbs the ink, thirstily imbibing every last drop of it, so Maggie's attention is sucked up by Stephen's geological story, which becomes, 'for the moment, [her] whole world.' But when Stephen seeks to reinitiate dialogue, and Maggie's attention moves from the content of his speech to his act of attending to her, she feels a 'returning self-consciousness'. This disrupts her absorption in his speech and prevents her from immersing herself in conversation with him. She blushes and looks away. In order to shield herself from his attention she tries to absorb herself in her knitting; but this too, we are led to imagine, is disrupted by her awareness of Stephen's attention.

Consider a different example, one in which I'm reading alone in the kitchen until my flatmate's new boyfriend enters to make a cup of tea. After the initial stream of smalltalk runs dry, we both make a concerted effort to focus on our respective activities, though we occasionally cast one another an inquiring self-conscious eye. My self-consciousness in this instance inhibits both my ability to interact, fluidly and naturally, with him and also my ability to immerse myself in the paper that I was reading. My attention is caught in uncomfortable suspense: thanks to my self-consciousness I cannot absorb myself in interaction with him, and yet thanks to the fact he's attending to me I cannot successfully absorb myself in anything else.

If this is right, then though we should follow O'Brien (2011, p. 102) in distinguishing an agent's *acting* self-consciously — i.e. the behaviour characteristic of ordinary self-consciousness — from their *feeling* of self-consciousness, we should nevertheless be careful to avoid exaggerating their separation. Part of what it is to feel self-conscious, after all, is to be aware of one's body, and particularly one's bodily activity, in a particular kind of way. Consider two further observations in elaboration of this.

First, before my housemate's boyfriend entered the kitchen, I held my posture unselfconsciously. But now that I'm aware that he's looking at me, my holding of a certain posture becomes something that I must do intentionally, so as to appear comfortable. In this vein, Scheler (1987, p. 25) writes of the embarrassed person that 'he does not know where to put his hands and feet; he feels himself handicapped while talking and acting'.

Second, another's gaze can alter the inner character of my activity, even if this results in no change that is visible to an observer. Suppose I succeed in looking nonchalant upon entering a full lecture hall, even as I draw attention away from the speaker and towards myself. Though my bodily activity might be outwardly indiscriminable from the way I walk when I'm not being watched, it might nevertheless *feel* different, and moreover, might actually *be* different insofar as it's done with effort against the pressure of the audience's gaze. Sometimes I might feel as if I'm simply mimicking the behaviour of a comfortable person, rather than 'acting naturally'.

When I'm absorbed in a conversation with someone I know well, I don't need to think about how to respond to them or how to comport myself. I grasp each stage of the interaction as calling for some kinds of response rather than others and I respond accordingly. If we're having a conversation about a difficult topic in philosophy, the kind of conversation which involves periods of pensive silence during which a thought is carefully formulated, this might involve a kind of 'not knowing exactly how to respond', but one which is importantly different from the disruptive kind of 'not knowing' characteristic of ordinary self-consciousness. In a conversation of the aforementioned sort, I might unreflectively apprehend the possibility of taking a relatively prolonged period of time to formulate a thought as being an appropriate mode of comporting myself in this kind of interaction, and, assuming that the other also recognises it as such, it might constitute a phase in our mutual absorption in the conversation we're having. When I feel self-conscious, by contrast, this fluid interaction is

disrupted and I'm forced to think, not only about the topic of conversation, but also about the way I should respond: I must deliberate about the manner of my response, about how to comport myself towards the other, how much time to take in responding to them, how long to hold eye contact with them and, indeed, how to stop appearing so self-conscious around them.

Ordinary self-consciousness can therefore be regarded as a form of self-conscious social anxiety which one experiences as a source of disruption to one's activity. This is perhaps what Anscombe had in mind when she said that ordinary self-consciousness is 'a feeling of being troubled by being observed'. Care is needed here, however. Though it's true that the anxiety involved in ordinary self-consciousness often takes an unpleasant form, it isn't obvious that it always does or that it's inherently unpleasant. It can be contrasted with shame and humiliation in this regard. These are straightforwardly unpleasant emotions which one would have to be a masochist of the stripe of Dostoyevsky's narrator from *Notes from Underground* to enjoy. Ordinary self-consciousness, by contrast, seems to bear a more complex relation to pleasure and displeasure. Though often uncomfortable, these feelings can be a source of humour, and the anxious vulnerability characteristic of ordinary self-consciousness is often a precondition for certain forms of excitement. Consider Nagel's (1969) example of Romeo and Juliet, each casting the other admiring glances across the room of a cocktail bar, each becoming aware that the other is aroused by them, that the other is aroused by their aroused response to them, and so forth. A plausible case could be made for the idea that the anxious suspense of ordinary self-consciousness is an essential aspect of the pleasure they take in this interchange. After all, the reason it seems so exciting for them (and their resulting recognition of their mutual interest so ecstatic) is precisely that they are both anxiously unsure about where they stand with the other, because they are both self-conscious before the other.

### *2.3. 'Prototypical' and 'Derivative' Forms of Ordinary Self-Consciousness*

So far I've focused on the feeling of self-consciousness before another's gaze. It's worth emphasising, however, that there are other forms that ordinary self-consciousness can take. Indeed, I have alluded to several: feeling self-conscious when someone is actively avoiding my attention, for example, or in anticipation of being scrutinised. I can also feel a kind of self-consciousness during a videocall, being aware *that* I'm the object of another's attention even though I don't feel their gaze on me or see their gaze as being directed towards me. I might feel self-conscious before a CCTV camera, during a schizophrenic episode and perhaps even before the gaze of a non-human animal.

It would be a mistake, I think, to hastily assume that we must treat the feeling of self-consciousness before another's gaze as on an explanatory par with these other cases. We should not assume in advance that the best account will be one which understands ordinary self-consciousness in terms of what all cases of ordinary self-consciousness have in common. In particular, I think we should be open to the idea that it might be more illuminating to provide an account of the prototypical form of ordinary self-consciousness (the feeling of self-consciousness before another who is attending to one) and, on this basis, to explain how this makes possible other, structurally distinct, forms of ordinary self-consciousness (such as those mentioned above). On the latter approach, we would arrive at a general understanding of ordinary self-consciousness when we understand how these derivative cases are related to the prototypical case such that it wouldn't be a mere coincidence that we call them all by the same name (in §4 I will outline an approach of this sort).

### §3. O'Brien on Ordinary Self-Consciousness

#### *3.1. Ordinary Self-consciousness as Observation of Oneself*

The philosophical interest of ordinary self-consciousness lies in the special form of intersubjective relation which holds between the self-conscious person and the person before whom they feel self-conscious. In this section I will argue that this cannot be understood in terms of either of the forms of intersubjective relation standardly acknowledged in recent discussions of intersubjectivity in the analytic tradition.

A common approach in this tradition has been to understand intersubjective relations reductively, in terms of psychological states and acts that can be understood independently of the relation in question. For example, the experience of being looked at might be understood entirely in terms of one's awareness (belief, judgement, perception or imagination) that one figures in the intentional contents of another's state of awareness in a particular kind of way (e.g. Peacocke 2014, Ch. 10; Nagel 1969).

Some philosophers have opposed this general approach by arguing that certain forms of face to face communication which involve two subjects taking up an 'attitude of address' towards one another make possible a special form of 'you-awareness'. On this view, in order for me to stand in this relation to you as 'you', you must also stand to me in this very same relation, and this must therefore be understood as a single experiential relation holding between two subjects: an experience 'for two'. Each subject's you-awareness of the other, on this view, is an aspect of the relation holding between them both rather than being ontologically prior to this relation (e.g. Eilan 2016; Eilan Forthcoming).

Ordinary self-consciousness cannot be straightforwardly understood as a second person relation in this sense, since it doesn't necessarily involve the kind of 'mutuality' definitive of these relations. I can feel self-conscious before your gaze, without you being aware that I'm aware that you're

looking at me — perhaps you think you’re successfully spying on me. Moreover, second personal engagement is an activity which, when it is going well, is something I become immersed in whereas ordinary self-consciousness consists, in large part, in the disruption of this kind of interaction. Maggie is immersed in Stephen’s speech until she becomes aware that he is attending to her. His attention to her manifests in his act of addressing her, but her self-consciousness before his attention constitutes an obstacle to her engaging in conversation with him.

By comparison, the former approach seems, at first glance, to provide a more promising way of understanding ordinary self-consciousness. In a pioneering discussion of ordinary self-consciousness, O’Brien (2011, pp. 111-3) provides account of the structure of ordinary self-consciousness which is in accord with this general approach. She suggests that it involves awareness of oneself ‘from the perspective of another,’ where this is understood as ‘focus on oneself from the third person point of view’ (ibid, p. 112).<sup>3</sup> O’Brien’s account involves the following three conditions:

- (i) I’m conscious of a person, A, from the third person point of view.

This states the fundamental way in which another person can figure in the experience of ordinary self-consciousness. When I feel self-conscious before another, B, I imaginatively occupy B’s third person perspective on me. And, in doing so, I presuppose that I’m the person represented from this point of view. Thus:

- (ii) I’m aware that I *myself* am A.

Finally, when I feel self-conscious, I’m acutely aware of the fact that I’m a potential object for evaluation by the other:

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<sup>3</sup> See also O’Brien (2020, pp. 557-8).

- (iii) I'm conscious of A as being a potential object of evaluation in accord with some evaluative schema.

The intentional object of ordinary self-consciousness, on this view, is myself, as I imagine myself to appear from an observer's perspective. This is a central aspect of the view we are considering since it is intended to capture the way in which ordinary self-consciousness is disruptive. As Merleau-Ponty observes:

The other's look becomes an annoyance for the child, and everything happens as though, when he is looked at, his attention is displaced from the task he is carrying out to a representation of himself in the process of carrying it out. (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 152)

Just as seeing my reflection in a mirror when I'm trying to talk to someone or hearing the sound of my own voice can distract me from what I'm doing, so imagining myself from the third person point of view can disrupt my absorbed activity. In what follows I will argue that this account fails to provide a satisfying account of ordinary self-consciousness.

### 3.2. *Narcissism*

This account presents an unduly 'narcissistic' view of ordinary self-consciousness. In the myth, Narcissus sees his reflection in a lake and becomes immersed in the contemplation of himself.<sup>4</sup> For O'Brien, the disruption produced by ordinary self-consciousness is a variation on this theme, a kind of forced-narcissism which leads me to 'focus on [myself] from the third person point of view' (O'Brien 2011: 112). This leads to two problems.

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<sup>4</sup> e.g. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book III.

First, when I feel self-conscious before another's gaze I'm not caught up imagining myself from the third person point of view in this way. Rather than being focused on myself as I imagine myself to appear from the third person perspective, when I feel self-conscious I'm focused on the other whose gaze I experienced as being directed 'at me' and as necessitating a response from me. I must acknowledge their gaze, with a nod or a smile, by asking them what they're looking at, or else I must actively avoid their gaze. Anything I do will constitute a response. Even if I try to stare through them, this will be something which must be done with effort against the pressure exerted upon me by the other's gaze, something which they are liable to experience as being a reaction to them. It's this pressure that I feel inclined to avoid by avoiding eye contact, or by avoiding social interaction altogether. So though ordinary self-consciousness involves a kind of self-directed attention, this shouldn't be conceived in terms of attention to oneself from an observer's third person perspective. Rather, this self-directed attention is 'transparent' in the sense that I attend to myself insofar as I attend to the practical issue of how I am to respond to the other whose attention I experience as necessitating a response from me.

Second, there is nothing inherently other-involving about the kind of disruption involved in imagining oneself from the third person perspective. As the case of Narcissus reveals, a lake or mirror could have done the job just as well. O'Brien embraces this idea, suggesting that we might 'feel self-conscious before ourselves':

Imagine you are dancing on your own in your study. You could suddenly disengage from your leaping, seeing yourself from the outside, and thereby coming to feel self-conscious about what you are doing, quietly sitting back down to finish writing that paper. (O'Brien 2011, p. 112)

If my description of ordinary self-consciousness in §2 is compelling, we should be reluctant to grant that this is a genuine instance of ordinary self-consciousness. There I observed that it is central to my *feeling* of self-conscious that it involves a kind of anxious disruption to my activity in which I'm conscious of the other's attention as exerting a pressure on me and that I'm unsure how to respond to this attention; I don't know where to put my hands or how to comport myself. This kind of anxiety doesn't occur in any of my so called 'relations with myself' — it takes two. Indeed, it is plausibly *because* of this anxious suspense that we speak of *feeling* self-conscious in the first place.

If this doesn't deter one from describing this case as one of 'feeling self-conscious', rather than pressing the point I would only insist that a proper understanding of this kind of case must treat it as being parasitic on the prototypical case. More specifically, the anxiety-inducing character of the 'feeling of self-consciousness before the mirror' is derived from the prototypical case of self-consciousness before another's attention. When I 'feel self-conscious before the mirror', or when I hear the sound of my own voice, I have an experience of myself from the outside. But, we aren't inclined to describe all experiences of ourselves as we appear from the outside as instances of ordinary self-consciousness. Some such experiences are affectively neutral, whereas others take a wonder-inducing form (one which might lead me to ask "wow, how could *I* be *that*?").<sup>5</sup> The cases that are conducive to O'Brien's account, by contrast, are cases in which these externalised experiences of oneself take an anxiety-inducing form. They are experiences that might lead one to ask: "Do I *really* look like that when I move in that way?", "Is *that* what my voice sounds like to others?" The reason these experiences are anxiety-inducing rather than affectively neutral or wonder-inducing, however, is that they reveal to me the deep disparity between my assumptions about how I appear to others and how I actually

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<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of the wonder-inducing case, see Nagel (1986, Ch. IV).

appear to others. This disparity is disturbing insofar as it makes me lose my confidence in my ability to know how I'm likely to appear by acting in a certain kind of way. I cease to be confident that speaking *in this way* generally tends to have the intended kind of impression upon another, that looking *like this* will have the desired impression on others who are observing me from a particular point of view, that dancing *in this way* looks cool, and so on.<sup>6</sup> This, in turn, makes me more prone to the prototypical form of self-consciousness and to the feeling of anticipatory self-consciousness (another 'derivative' form of ordinary self-consciousness which I will discuss in §4.5). It is therefore in virtue of this relation to the prototypical case that so-called 'self-consciousness before oneself' gets its anxiety-inducing character.

### 3.3 Unity and Disruption.

Earlier, I adapted Sartre by claiming that ordinary self-consciousness is consciousness of *oneself* before *another*. When Sartre (2018, p. 309) writes this, he immediately adds that 'these two structures are inseparable'. By this he means that my consciousness of the other *as looking at me* and my first personal consciousness of myself *as being looked at* are two aspects of a single state of awareness. Sartre frequently describes the experience of being looked at by analogy with the experience of being touched, and this helps to characterise the unity of my awareness of myself before the other's gaze. When someone touches me, my *exteroceptive* awareness of their hand touching me and my *interoceptive* experience of pressure on my body are two aspects of a single state of awareness.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, my awareness of the other *as looking at me* (and thereby *disrupting* my activity) and my awareness of myself *as being looked at* and (of my activity as thereby *being disrupted*) are

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<sup>6</sup> For empirical support, see Holzman & Rousey (1966, p. 84).

<sup>7</sup> e.g. Martin (1992) and Kalderon (2018).

aspects of a single state of awareness, neither of which can be completely described independently of the other.

If this is right, then it's not as if in ordinary self-consciousness I take two perspectives on myself, a *subject's* perspective on my activity 'from the inside' and my perceptual awareness of the other who is looking at me, and an *observer's* perspective on myself, as seen 'from the outside'. O'Brien's account is problematic in this regard since she insists that ordinary self-consciousness involves adopting two experiential perspectives on oneself in this way. It thereby places a wedge between my inner awareness of my activity as being disrupted and my awareness of the other's gaze as disrupting me. O'Brien understands disruptiveness of ordinary self-consciousness in terms of my imaginative awareness of myself from the other's third person perspective. This is disruptive insofar as it distracts me from my inner (first personal) awareness of my activity. But if this were true, these two perspectives and their respective objects would compete for my attention. Insofar as I attend to myself 'from the outside', I would be distracted from my awareness of my body and activity 'from the inside'. Insofar as I'm immersed in my awareness of my body and activity 'from the inside', I would be distracted from my awareness of myself 'from the third person point of view'.<sup>8</sup> This is one problem, and it's connected with two further problems.

First, this view seeks to explain the disruption to my activity characteristic of ordinary self-consciousness in terms of the thought that I'm imagining myself from the third person point of view and that this distracts me from the inner awareness of my bodily activity. But reflection on the phenomenology of ordinary self-consciousness suggests that the form of disruption it involves, far from *distracting* me from my inner awareness of my body, makes it *uncomfortably salient*. The other's gaze (as I

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<sup>8</sup> In claiming that ordinary self-consciousness involves taking these two perspectives, O'Brien (2011, pp. 106-7) suggests that they must be held at one and the same time. The objections outlined here suggest that these thoughts aren't compatible if we think of ordinary self-conscious as involving 'focus on oneself from the third person perspective'.

emphasised in §2.2) modifies the felt character of my bodily awareness and my awareness of my activity in a way that cannot be explained on the assumption that the other is only involved in my experience insofar as I imagine myself from their point of view.

Second, though to be disrupted from my immersed activity by imaginatively observing myself from the third person perspective constitutes a disruption to my activity, it constitutes a disruption of the wrong order. It is merely to be *distracted* from one form of activity by another activity, specifically the activity of imaginative self-contemplation. This is an act, moreover, in which one might become immersed just like Narcissus. But the special form of anxious disruption characteristic of ordinary self-consciousness constitutes an obstacle to any form of immersed activity, including the act of imagining how one appears from the third person perspective.

#### *3.4. Ordinary Self-Consciousness as a Propositional Attitude*

These objections suggest that though ordinary self-consciousness might cause one to imagine oneself from the third person point of view, it does not itself consist in an imaginative experience of this sort. Perhaps O'Brien's account can be defended by interpreting conditions (i)-(iii) in terms of the subject's awareness *that* they are seen by the other and up for evaluation by them. On this interpretation, a person who feels self-conscious thinks of herself as being thought about by another and as being up for evaluation by them.<sup>9</sup> Since this view acknowledges that ordinary self-consciousness doesn't involve imagination of oneself from the third person point of view it avoids the objections just outlined. However, in doing so, it also incurs the obligation to explain the disruptiveness of ordinary self-consciousness in some other way. It might try to do so by shifting the weight to condition (iii). For instance, it might be suggested, that the

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<sup>9</sup> An account of this sort is suggested by Peacocke (2014, p. 246).

conjunction of one's awareness that one is up for evaluation by another along with a standing desire to come off well is what explains this disruptiveness. In this way, ordinary self-consciousness would be anxiety-inducing in the way an exam is anxiety-inducing: one's consciousness of being up for evaluation, whether in an exam or by another person, can lead one to feel nervous in a way that disrupts one's performance.

There are two problems with this approach.

First, it is too intellectualistic. Ordinary self-consciousness doesn't seem to consist entirely in a subject's attitudes towards certain propositions. Rather, it is an experience of the other's gaze as disrupting one's bodily activity in a way that isn't plausibly reducible to one's thoughts and perceptually grounded judgements *that* one is up for evaluation by another.

Second, this account is unable to acknowledge the way in which the special form of disruptiveness characteristic of ordinary self-consciousness precludes the possibility of immersion in *any* form of activity. When I take an exam, though the pressure of the situation and the intensity of my desire to do well might make me nervous, I can respond to this pressure by absorbing myself in the exam. When I feel self-conscious before another's gaze, by contrast, I'm affected in a way that precludes me from immersing myself in interaction with them, but also in immersing myself in anything else.

These objections suggest that this appeal to a subject's propositional attitudes is insufficient to account for the distinctive form of disruptiveness characteristic of ordinary self-consciousness. If my argument so far is compelling, then it seems that there is good reason for thinking that ordinary self-consciousness cannot be adequately understood in terms of either of the forms of intersubjective relation standardly acknowledged in the analytic literature on interpersonal self-consciousness. If this is right, then it seems that if we are to understand ordinary self-consciousness, we must make a fresh start.

#### §4. A Transactional Account of Ordinary Self-Consciousness.

##### 4.1. 'Revelatory' and 'Transactional' Aspects of 'The Look'

A notable feature of O'Brien's account is that it only acknowledges what we might call the 'revelatory' dimension of the other's gaze. When I encounter another person, their eyes and facial expression reveal their awareness of me and that I'm up for evaluation by them. This, in turn, might cause me to imagine how I might appear from their third person perspective, to someone with their standards and ideals. This experience naturally leads to, and is partially constitutive of, ordinary self-consciousness as O'Brien conceives of it.

By contrast, in his discussion of 'the look' in Part III of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre emphasises what we might call the 'transactional' dimension of the human gaze. According to Sartre, when I become aware of the other's gaze, I'm conscious of them as thereby *acting upon me*. On this account we are therefore related, not merely as two spectators of one another's mental lives, but as *agent* and *patient*.<sup>10</sup> This basic idea is expressed nicely by Gardner (2005, pp. 330-1) who observes that 'the real meaning of the gaze', for Sartre, 'is that of an action...we do better to think of it on the analogy with the application of a physical force'.

Sartre has a radical theory of what the transactional dimension of the gaze amounts to, holding that when the other looks at me they subject me to an ontological transformation. 'I am touched in my being' in such a way that 'essential modifications appear within my structures' (Sartre 2018, p. 357). More specifically, the other's gaze freezes me, transforming me from a being-for-itself, a being which 'is what it is not and is not what it is', into a being-in-itself, something which 'it what it is'.<sup>11</sup> Like the other, I too have

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<sup>10</sup> This sense of 'transaction' is adopted from Ford (2014).

<sup>11</sup> This isn't to say that I'm transformed into a 'mere thing'. Rather, my consciousness takes on a degraded form as a kind of psychological object (see Gardner 2009, p. 138).

this power: when I look at others they ‘are frozen by me into objects’ (Sartre 2018, p. 364).

On Sartre’s view, the relation between the other’s *freezing* of me and my *being frozen* is not one between two constitutively independent events. Rather, Sartre claims that they are two aspects of a ‘profound unity of consciousnesses’ or a ‘unity of being’ (as opposed to a Husserlian ‘harmony of monads’). This is akin to Aristotle’s thought that one and the same act is the manifestation of the active capacity of one thing (the sound-source’s ‘sounding’) and the passive capacity of another (the hearer’s ‘hearkening’) in such a way that this ‘acting-and-being-acted-upon’ is, Aristotle claims, ‘one actuality’ (see *On the Soul*, 3.2). We might express this idea by saying, adapting the words of Ford (2014, p. 25), that the other’s *freezing of me* and my *being frozen by them* are ‘two aspects of a single material reality, a transaction between agent and patient’.

For many, Sartre’s radical theory of intersubjectivity, couched as it is in his ontology of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, will be too large a commitment to swallow for the purposes of understanding ordinary self-consciousness. My aim in this paper is to argue that, regardless of what we think about Sartre’s general theory of intersubjectivity, or his ontological interpretation of the gaze, *that* the gaze has a transactional dimension is an important insight which we ought to acknowledge if we are to understand ordinary self-consciousness. I will outline an account of ordinary self-consciousness according to which embraces this insight whilst remaining neutral on the other aspects of Sartre’s theory. More specifically, I will argue that when I feel self-conscious before another’s gaze, I’m conscious of myself as *being acted upon* by the other in such a way that what I experience

them as *doing to me* and what I experience myself as thereby *undergoing at their hands* are two aspects of a single irreducibly bipolar transaction.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.2 *The Power of The Human Gaze*

We are social animals that co-habit a social world with others whose practical significance for us is not an open question. By this I mean that their presence is not something we can be practically neutral on, something that we might take no notice of or interest in, at least until we happen to form a desire either way. Rather, as Simone Weil observes:

Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence... the power of halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out. If we step aside for a passer-by on the road, it is not the same thing as stepping aside to avoid a billboard; alone in our rooms, we get up, walk about, sit down again quite differently from the way we do when we have a visitor. (Weil 2005, p. 187)

A common idea in the phenomenological tradition is that my awareness of the world is not that of a mere spectator. I find myself in a situation within a world that is teleologically structured, affording possibilities for certain kinds of action and affect. Moreover, my consciousness of myself is interdependent with my consciousness of the world so understood: thus the phrase ‘being-in-the-world’.<sup>13</sup> Sartre’s insight is that the other’s gaze transforms my practical situation and this is *eo ipso* a transformation in my

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that an account of ordinary self-consciousness which takes on board the more radical aspects of Sartre’s theory, including his treatment of the different ontological dimensions of the body, would differ in important respects from the comparatively modest account I defend here. As far as my aim in the present paper is concerned, the important point is that both accounts would agree in acknowledging and emphasising the importance of the transactional dimension of the gaze.

<sup>13</sup> This idea is understood in different ways by Husserl (1973), Heidegger (1962), Sartre (2018) and Merleau-Ponty (1962).

consciousness of myself. We can specify the character of this transformation as follows.

First, the other's act of attending to me transforms my practical situation by necessitating a response from me. As Korsgaard observes:

If I call out your name, I make you stop in your tracks...Now you cannot proceed as you did before. Oh, you can proceed, all right, but not just as you did before. For now if you walk on, you will be ignoring me and slighting me. It will probably be difficult for you, and you will have to muster a certain active resistance, a sense of rebellion. (Korsgaard 1996, p. 140)

The same is true when I realise that someone is attentively looking at me. I must either acknowledge or avoid their gaze, smile at them or ask 'what are *you* looking at?' But there is no possibility of their gaze making no impact whatsoever on the character of my activity — even avoiding their gaze, forbearing from the instinctual urge to respond, pretending that I haven't noticed, or 'looking through' them is something which now must be *done*, with 'a certain active resistance'. Insofar as the other's gaze necessitates a response from me in this sense, and insofar as the character of my response, its apparent naturalness and appropriateness, is determined in part by the timeliness of its delivery, the other's gaze can be described as exerting a pressure on me.

Second, this transformation in my practical situation is interdependent with a transformation in my awareness of my body. I'm aware of the other's gaze as necessitating a response from me, and since I care deeply about the impression I make on them, I become acutely aware of my body's natural expressiveness. That is, I become aware of its capacity to reveal my thoughts, feelings and anxieties, to thwart my will and make me seen in ways that I don't want to be seen. In his writings on photography, Cavell (2005, p.

126) writes of the human body before the camera as becoming ‘a field of betrayal more than a ground of communication’. His thought is that the camera has the power to document ‘the individual’s self-conscious efforts to control the body each time it is conscious of the camera’s attention to it’. Even in so much as trying to control and present my body in a particular way, I often *thereby* reveal something about myself that I want to keep hidden. In effortfully trying to act comfortably before the other’s gaze, I am liable to reveal my discomfort (and, indeed, the embarrassing fact that I’m presenting myself in the first place). Yet, as Weil observes, when I’m being watched, I cannot simply continue acting the way I was when I was alone. Appearing natural and comfortable before another’s gaze is an achievement, something itself maintained with effort against the pressure their attention exerts upon me. And even when I succeed in appearing nonchalant my body nevertheless feels very different to the way it would when I perform outwardly indistinguishable bodily movements in private.

#### *4.3. The Experience of Being Made to Feel Self-Conscious*

When I experience another’s gaze as being directed at me, it is experienced as necessitating a response from me, one which transforms my practical situation and alters my awareness of my body. Ordinary self-consciousness describes a particular form this transformation takes and can be contrasted with what we might call a ‘confident response’ to the other’s gaze.

Someone who responds confidently to the other’s gaze is able to bear the pressure it is experienced as exerting upon them. They experience the other’s gaze as necessitating a response from them, but because they unreflectively apprehend certain possibilities for response as being appropriate, they will be able to act accordingly, without worrying about how to respond. They will thereby be able to establish a rapport with the other and immerse themselves in interaction with them.

By contrast, the person feeling self-conscious finds themselves caught in a difficult practical situation. They are ‘caught’ since anything they do will constitute a response to the other’s gaze, one which will alter the dynamics of their interaction. And the situation is difficult insofar as they do not unreflectively ‘feel’ the other’s gaze as calling for a certain kind of response in the way the person who responds confidently does. This, moreover, is not simply a matter of the mere *absence of awareness*, but rather of the *awareness of an absence*: they feel as if there is some natural and appropriate response to the other’s gaze, one which they are conscious of being unaware of. As a result, they are conscious of not knowing where to look or what to say, and they have to think carefully about what to say next. This pressure is exacerbated by their awareness that the clock is ticking: in order to respond naturally and appropriately they must respond in a way that is timely. Thus, the fantasies associated with self-consciousness typically involve the abdication or, more precisely, the dissolution of social agency. To actively escape, to run out of the room would constitute grounds for embarrassment or humiliation. Therefore the relevant fantasies tend to be passive: I wish ‘that the space occupied by me should be instantaneously empty’ (Williams 1993, p. 89)

This transformation of the subject’s practical situation is interdependent with a transformation of their consciousness of their body. Insofar as they are unsure about how to respond to the other, they are also unsure about how to comport their own body before the other’s gaze. As a result, they become acutely aware of their body’s liability to betray their efforts at appearing comfortable and unselfconscious. This often leads them to shrink from view, to think of their body as being something to be mastered or hidden, to feel uncomfortable in any posture they adopt and to fidget in ways that betray their discomfort. This is nicely described in some of Sartre’s observations regarding *timidité*. Sartre describes the timid (or, as we might say, self-conscious) person as feeling a ‘constant unease’ in

connection with their body, as trying ‘to reach it, to master it...in order to give it the shape and attitude it should have’ but, in doing so, they feel as if they have to ‘act “blindly”, to guess where to shoot, without ever knowing the results of [their] shot”. This, in turn, can lead to the desire to become invisible (Sartre 2018, p. 471 ; cp. Beauvoir 2011, p. 332).

This account avoids the difficulties facing O’Brien’s approach. First, it acknowledges that when I feel self-consciousness, I don’t attend to myself from the third person point of view. Rather I focus on the other who I apprehend as attending to me and thereby transforming my first personal awareness of my situation and my body. This avoids the difficulties outlined in §3.2. Moreover, since my consciousness of the other as *acting upon me* and my consciousness of myself *as being acted upon* are two aspects of a single state of awareness, there is no implication that they will compete for my attention. Attending to the other’s gaze insofar as it is experienced as acting upon me *is* to attend to myself insofar as I’m conscious of being acted upon by them. Finally, the fact the fact that the other’s gaze is experienced as necessitating a response from me and that I’m aware of my lack of awareness as to how to respond captures the way in which ordinary self-consciousness constitutes a special form of disruption to my immersed activity. Thus it avoids the difficulties posed in §3.3.

#### *4.4. Confidence and Self-Consciousness*

Whether or not a subject is able to confidently bear the pressure of the other’s gaze will be determined by a variety of factors. People we think of as being confident are thought of as being characteristically able to bear the pressure exerted on them by the attention of others. They are able to bear this pressure insofar as they have habituated practical knowledge of how to relate to certain kinds of people in certain social contexts. This knowledge of the norms that govern certain ordinary social situations need not admit of codification into a series of rules or general principles. Rather it is

plausible to think, following McDowell (1998), that someone with the virtue of confidence simply ‘sees’ certain kinds of situation as calling for a certain kind of response and is able to act accordingly, without subjecting their habituated responses to scrutiny, without worrying about how they will be received by the other and without fearing embarrassment or humiliation any more than is appropriate in the circumstances. Moreover, insofar as confidence typically implies the possession of other social virtues, such as some degree of good humour and emotional intelligence, it’s likely that the confident person will have a richer conception of the variety of possible responses, all else being equal, than someone who is not confident.

By contrast, those we think of as ‘shy’ or ‘self-conscious’ people are thought of as being characteristically more disposed to feelings of self-consciousness than the confident person. This might be a product of the fact that they lack, to some extent, the social experience and habituated practical knowledge partly constitutive of the virtue of confidence (or the associated virtues of good humour, etc.). A consequence of this will be that their apprehension of the vanities of possible response will be much less rich than that of the confident person and, as a result, they will have to consciously think and often worry about how to respond in a given situation.

Nothing said so far entails that a generally confident person will never feel self-consciousness. In fact, one’s liability to feelings of self-consciousness is determined by situational as well as character-based factors. An otherwise confident agent might therefore come to feel self-consciousness in (at least) the following three kinds of case.

First, a confident person might feel self-conscious during a situation in which the stakes of the interaction are unusually high, as when they’re proposing to their partner. In cases of this sort, the importance of the interaction is liable to make them liable to call into question their habituated

responses and, as a result, they are more likely to succumb to the pressure exerted upon them by the other's gaze in the way described above.

Second, they might be liable to feel self-consciousness when there is no clear or appropriate mode of response, even for an agent who is socially skilled by ordinary standards. Thus in *The Guermantes Way*, when Swann confesses to the Duchesse de Guermantes, a self-confident master of social propriety, that he will be dead within a few months, she is flustered with self-consciousness insofar as 'she could find nothing in the code of conventions that indicated the right line to follow' (Proust 2016, p. 627). Bartky (1998a, p. 27) describes another case of this sort in which a young female academic feels self-conscious during an interview because the chairman of the committee has been fixedly staring at her breasts for the entire meeting. Even a very confident person might understandably find herself at a loss as to how to react to being looked at in this way in this particular context, and this in turn can make them vulnerable to feelings of self-consciousness.

Third, a confident agent might feel self-conscious in a situation not because they are unaware of what the appropriate response would be, but because it would be difficult, if not impossible, for them, being the kind of person they visibly are, to act in a way that will appear natural and appropriate to their audience in this context. A middle-class academic might feel self-conscious for these reasons when they find themselves in a working class pub. Similarly, Puwar (2004, p. 43) reports the experience of a black civil servant who describes their experience of being made to feel out of place at work-related functions: 'you feel that they are noticing you and can't quite work out what you are doing there. It's like going into a pub in Cornwall. Every one turns around when you open the door...that sort of feeling.' In such a case, their self-consciousness might be a product not of any lack of awareness of the norms of appropriate response, but rather of

their awareness of themselves as not being the norm — although cases of this sort will often also be cases of the second sort.<sup>14</sup>

#### *4.5. Anticipatory Self-Consciousness*

Though this is an account only of the prototypical form of ordinary self-consciousness, it provides a basis on which the other derivative forms of ordinary self-consciousness mentioned in §2.3 can be explained. Due to space constraints, I will provide an explanation of anticipatory self-consciousness which will serve as a general illustration of my strategy in accounting for these derivative forms of ordinary self-consciousness.

Anticipatory self-consciousness is the form of self-consciousness you are liable to feel standing outside of a restaurant waiting for your date or when you're waiting in the lobby before an important interview. In these cases you feel self-conscious in anticipation of the immanent interaction even though you aren't yet conscious of yourself as being looked at or attended to by another. Rather, just as you might brace yourself in anticipation of a physical blow, so you can feel a kind of self-consciousness in anticipation of being affected in the manner of self-consciousness before another's gaze. The higher the stakes, the greater this nervousness will be.

It is an advantage of this account that it treats the prototypical form of ordinary self-consciousness and anticipatory self-consciousness as being structurally distinct, since doing so enables it to acknowledge important differences between these experiences. For instance, unlike the prototypical form anticipatory self-consciousness can be easily subdued by immersing oneself in something, such as a magazine or a mobile phone since there is no actual gaze calling for one's attention and necessitating a response from one. This account, moreover, acknowledges these differences whilst acknowledging the non-accidental relation between these forms of self-consciousness. Just as there would be no act of bracing oneself in

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<sup>14</sup> For further discussion of this kind of consciousness of oneself as not being the norm, see Alcoff (2006, especially p. 192) and Ahmed (2007).

anticipation of a blow if there were no blows, so there would be no experiences of anticipatory self-consciousness if there were no experiences of self-consciousness before another's gaze.

It is important to note that though anticipatory self-consciousness is explanatorily posterior to the prototypical case, this doesn't mean that it is unimportant. As much work in feminist philosophy and critical race theory argues, when a subject is consistently made to experience some feature of themselves, their body or their visible identity as evoking a heightened degree of scrutiny from others, they can come to experience themselves as being 'hypervisible' in some respect.<sup>15</sup> Women are particularly liable to experiences of this kind, brought up as they are to see themselves as an object of perusal by what Bartky (1998b, p. 38) calls 'the cold appraisal of the male connoisseur' and by routinely receiving unsolicited attention and comments from men on the street. As Beauvoir (2011, p. 332) observes, 'eyes follow her, her body is subject to comments; she would like to become invisible.'<sup>16</sup> It is only natural that experiencing oneself as being hypervisible in this way can lead one to feel the constant unease of anticipatory self-consciousness, more disposed to the prototypical form of self-consciousness before another's gaze, and more liable to becoming a self-conscious person.

#### *4.6 On Doing and Suffering*

This account enables us to extricate an important insight of Sartre's account of 'the look' without incurring the commitments of his ontology. This is not to deny, however, that this account has commitments of its own. The most obvious of these is the claim that what the self-conscious person is *undergoing* and what the person making them self-conscious is experienced as

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<sup>15</sup> For relevant work, see Alcoff (2006), Ahmed (2007), Al-Saji (2014), Fanon (2008) and Petherbridge (2017).

<sup>16</sup> See Bartky (1998c) and Beauvoir (2011, p. 330-34). Dolezal (2010) and Morris (2011) consider the relationship between these experiences of 'hypervisibility' and the desire to achieve a kind of 'invisibility' through cosmetic surgery.

*doing* are two aspects of an irreducible bipolar transaction. A consequence of this is that it is in conflict with a popular view of agency on which one's agency extends no further than the limits of one's person. For example, Davidson famously observed that all we ever do, strictly speaking, is move our bodies. He also noted that, in addition to this, we might acknowledge 'such troublesome cases as mental acts' (Davidson 1980, p. 59). But anything *beyond* the limits of my person, such as a light's being switched on or a person's being made self-conscious, is a 'further effect' of my activity. It will be acknowledged that things such as these are 'further effects' in terms of which I might redescribe what I do. But what I actually *do*, strictly speaking, and what a patient *undergoes* are two distinct, ontologically independent, events.

This would be a problem if Davidson's view was the only defensible view, but it isn't. Anscombe (2000, §29), for example, develops an account of agency according to which 'I do what happens'. Ford (2014, p. 15) elaborates on this idea by arguing that what the agent *does* to a patient and what the patient *undergoes* at the hands of the agent are 'two aspects of a single material reality'. Consider the causative verbs emphasised by Anscombe: 'scrape, push, wet, carry, eat, knock over, keep off, squash, make (e.g. noises, paper boats), hurt' (Anscombe 1981b). As Hornsby observes, we cannot pry apart what the agent is doing in these cases and what the patient is undergoing: my eating of the burger and the burger's being eaten, for example, or my carrying the suitcase and the suitcase's being carried. The causality here is internal to the transaction (Hornsby 2011: 107).

So though it's often thought that what I *do*, strictly speaking, is limited to my body or, at most, that which my body is in contact with, the account of ordinary self-consciousness outlined here constitutes phenomenological grounds for extending this limit to include the forms of interpersonal transaction holding between the self-conscious person and the person who is making them self-conscious. If this is right, then what a self-conscious

person *is undergoing* in being made to feel self-conscious by another cannot be pried apart from what the other is *doing to them*. Far from being an unacceptable commitment, I think this constitutes an enlightening feature of my account. In any case, it is enough for present purposes that my account is not obviously problematic in this regard.<sup>17</sup>

## §5. Conclusion

‘Humans’, Ernst Tugendhat (2016, p. xxv) observed, ‘are in a state of unease other animals do simply not know.’ One dimension of this is the unease we feel before the eyes of others. Reflection on this form of self-conscious social anxiety has turned out to be philosophically rich. It has drawn attention to a special form of interpersonal relation which is neglected in contemporary analytic treatments of intersubjectivity and which must be properly understood if we are to properly understand the role of the gaze in human social life. Not only does this illustrate the philosophical interest of ordinary self-consciousness, it makes possible a variety of new and illuminating ways of thinking about the role of the gaze in connection with phenomena such as eye contact, joint attention, and shame. Though there is obviously much more to be said about ordinary self-consciousness, particularly with regard to its derivative forms, its relationship to the philosophical notion of self-consciousness and its significance for ethical and political philosophy, I hope to have shown that this work would be interesting and worthwhile.

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<sup>17</sup> My account fits nicely with the account of agency defended by Ford (2018), for example.

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