

Is Bodily Self-Knowledge Perceptual?

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Preliminaries

- Work in progress (especially toward the end)
- A skeletal presentation

Outline

1. Introducing the topic.
2. Bodily self-knowledge is *non-observational*.
3. The *content* of bodily self-knowledge.
4. My thesis: bodily self-knowledge is perceptual – in a very special sense.
5. The crucial role of *dynamic sensations* in bodily self-knowledge.

1. Introducing the topic: bodily self-knowledge

- What is bodily self-knowledge? — Two features:
 - The *object* of knowledge: oneself (one's own body)
 - The *mode* of knowledge: known *from within*, not *from without* (or: known *as oneself*, not *as other*).

1. Introducing the topic: bodily self-knowledge

- Examples:
 - knowledge that one is sitting with legs crossed
 - knowledge that one is waving one's arm
- Non-examples (known *from without* or known *as other*):
 - knowledge that one's skin has become darker (observation)
 - knowledge that one has Vitamin D deficiency (observation, inference, testimony)

1. Introducing the topic: bodily self-knowledge

- Topic: *knowledge, as we ordinarily have it, of the presence, position (= posture), and movement of one's own limbs* (Brian O'Shaughnessy)
- Significance of this topic:
 - Crucial to understanding action, which is in turn crucial to understanding ourselves.
 - Helps to vindicate and substantiate the notion of *a bodily self* (a deeply anti-Cartesian notion)

2. The *non-observational* character of bodily self-knowledge

- Two *phenomenological* points:
 - A *general* phenomenological point
 - A *specific* phenomenological point [more later]

2.1. Phenomenological point: bodily self-knowledge is *non-observational*.

- The general phenomenological point (Wittgenstein, G. E. M. Anscombe):

As a matter of fact, when we ordinarily know the presence, position, and movement of our limbs, it is not by observation that we know. We just know, straight off, without observation (or inference or testimony).

2.3. Another formulation, in terms of *perception*

- Anscombe's point can also be made in terms of *perception* (in the narrow sense of sense-perception). For example, John McDowell: bodily self-knowledge is *non-perceptual*.
- (McDowell also makes an *explanatory* point: bodily self-knowledge is non-perceptual because it is *self-knowledge*.)

3. The *content* of bodily self-knowledge

- 3.1. The character of *sensations* in this knowledge
- 3.2. The *spatial* content of this knowledge
- 3.3. The Ayers-McDowell thesis

3.1. Sensations in bodily self-knowledge

- Q: If not by observation, then *how* do we know?
- One answer: “There is no how, I simply know.”
- Another answer: by *sensation* or *feeling*.
 - Q: “How do you know that your arm is bent?”
 - A: “Well, it feels so” or “Well, I feel that way”.
- Our capacity for such knowledge by feeling has been given a variety of names: *proprioception* (*kinesthesia, body-sense*).

3.1. Is proprioception a sense?

- Is proprioception a sense similar to the five familiar senses? Is it a sixth sense?
- Many say *yes*. On this view proprioceptive knowledge is a kind of *perceptual* knowledge. This conflicts with the Anscombe-McDowell view that this knowledge is *non-observational* or *non-perceptual*.
- How might this conflict be resolved?

3.1. The content of proprioceptive sensations

- A key question here is: what is the nature of proprioceptive sensations? More specifically: are they *sufficiently analogous* to sensations in the five customary senses to justify calling proprioception a sense? [This *needs* justification.]
- To sharpen this question, let us start with a view considered by Wittgenstein:

We should like to say of the sensation of posture that it has no content.

sensations: “no content”

- Example: I feel that my right arm is bent.
 - Wittgenstein’s “no content” cannot mean that the clause “that my right arm is bent” has no content. It obviously has a content (indeed a propositional content).
 - Plausible interpretation: “no content” here means: no *qualia*, that is, *no qualitative experience of secondary qualities*.
 - Secondary qualities. A large and fraught topic. Let a few examples suffice here: colors, sounds, smells, etc. (These are in contrast with primary qualities: size, shape, solidity, etc.)

sensations: “no content”

- It seems to be a distinctive feature of the phenomenology of proprioceptive knowledge that proprioceptive sensations have “no content”, no *qualia*. [This is the specific phenomenological point promised earlier.]
- But “no content” does not necessarily mean no proprioceptive sensations *at all*. The claim is that there are *some* sensations is at least worth consideration. [More later]
- Now, *if* there are proprioceptive sensations, how should we characterize them?

3.1. The content of proprioceptive

sensations: “inseparable”

- Anscombe is helpful here. She says that, normally, such sensations are “not separately describable” — normally the sensations can only be described in terms of what they enables us to know. E.g., sensation *of a bent arm*, sensation *of crossed legs*, ...
- This point is best appreciated by contrast with the five senses, e.g., with sight.

3.1. The content of proprioceptive

sensations: “inseparable”

- Contrast between proprioception and sight in *veridical* case:
 - Seeing a crocodile in the water :: Seeing a brown elongated something against a bluish background
 - Feeling my leg is bent :: [no description available]
- Contrast between proprioception and sight in *deceptive* case:
 - “I see a crocodile”. Upon recognizing a mistake, one can retreat to “I saw a brown elongated something”
 - “I feel my leg is bent”. Upon recognizing a mistake, one *cannot* retreat: there is *no* analogous place to retreat to.

3.1. The content of proprioceptive sensations: “inseparable”

sensations: inseparable

- Sum-up: Proprioceptive sensations are “inseparable” — their content can only be described in terms of the presence, position, and movement of one’s own limbs. In particular, they cannot be described in terms of secondary qualities. (General qualification: under normal circumstances)

3.2. The content of proprioceptive sensations: space

sensations: *space*

- But, as we saw, proprioceptive sensations do have *some* kind of content. What kind? — Primarily *spatial* content.
- Example: “I feel that my right arm is bent”. The content of this feeling or sensation is: *my right arm is bent*.
 - Obviously, “right”, “bent” are spatial concepts.
 - Further, “arm” also involves space, because an arm is a material object that occupies space (Peter Strawson).

3.2. The content of proprioceptive sensations: *body-space*

- But the kind of space involved here is very special.
 - (1) My body has a *spatial centrality* that is unique and ultimate. Spatially, I am always *here*, while all other material objects in the world are at various distances and directions from me. (Husserl: the body carries within itself a *null-point of orientation*.)
 - (2) This space is an *interior* space – internal to one's bodily self. Let us call this space *body-space* (following O'Shaughnessy).

3.2. The content of proprioceptive sensations: *interiority of body-space*

- **Exterior space:** this is the space we most often speak of, for example, in the physical sciences (e.g., astronomy), in space-involving practical disciplines (e.g., civil engineering), in the spatial arts (e.g., sculpture), and in much everyday life (e.g., “taking a taxi to the airport”). In all these cases, space is *exterior* — it is external to one’s bodily self.
- **Interior space:** “my right arm”, ... Here space is *interior*. My arm is internal to me, to my bodily self. “Internal” in a strong sense — my arm not only (1) *is* a part of myself, but also (2) *known* to be a part of myself and, most importantly, (3) *known from within*.

3.2. The content of proprioceptive sensations: *body-space* and *body-image*

- So in body-space there is a peculiar combination of *interiority* and *spatiality* (which is traditionally tied to exteriority).
- This peculiar combination is very well captured by O'Shaughnessy's notion of a *body-image* (both long-term and short-term body-image).
- The body-image is crucial both for action and proprioceptive knowledge. Thanks to the body-image, one's body constitutes *a primordial landscape*—*an internally accessible map or frame of reference*—through which one knows the presence, position, and movement of one's limbs.

3.2. The content of proprioceptive sensations: *body-space*

- One's body-space is an *individualized* space that is articulated at various joints of nature (elbows, knees, etc.).
- It is in this body-space that the self, namely the self-conscious bodily being, is extended, and in ways that are knowable from within, without observation.

3.3. The Ayers-McDowell thesis

- To sum up, proprioceptive sensations
 - have “no content”: no experience of *secondary qualities*.
 - have content: *spatial* content — *body-spatial* content.
- These two points are important for the Anscombe-McDowell view that proprioception is non-perceptual. But this view also relies on a further premise, namely the Ayers-McDowell thesis:

There is no perception of spatial properties without perception of secondary qualities.

Basic idea: perception of spatial properties must be *qualitatively mediated* by secondary qualities. (Example: shape and color)

3.3. Reformulation of the Anscombe-McDowell view

1. There is no perception of spatial properties without perception of secondary qualities. (Ayers-McDowell thesis)
2. There is indeed no perception of secondary qualities in proprioception. (“no content”, Wittgenstein)
3. Therefore, in proprioception there is no perception of spatial properties.
4. But in proprioception we do have knowledge of spatial properties. (body-space, O’Shaughnessy)
5. So, proprioceptive knowledge is non-perceptual.

4. My thesis: Proprioception *is* perceptual,
but in a very special sense.

- Basic motivating intuition: proprioception is genuinely *sensuous*.
- This special sense of perception is not readily available, but has to be forged.
- (Perception in this special sense is *non-observational*. Observation implies a *distancing* or *objectification* of the object from the subject, but perception need not imply this.)

4.1. Proprioception as a special mode of perception: *qualitative mediation*

- Claim: the Ayers-McDowell thesis doesn't hold *in general*. In some cases spatial properties *can* be perceived without the mediation of secondary qualities. In what cases? — In proprioception. [*And* in touch.]
- **Note**: This does *not* mean that spatial properties can be perceived without any qualitative mediation at all. I think there must be *some* qualitative mediation, because space, to be perceived at all, must be perceived as *qualitatively differentially 'filled'*. (Analogy from colors)

4.1. Proprioception as a special mode of perception: *force*

- Key point: the mediating qualities need not be *secondary* qualities.
- Proprioception is mediated by *dynamic* qualities (e.g., pressure, tension, weight, ...)
- These qualities are *primary* qualities, because they are forms of *force*, and force is a primary feature of the world.
- Force is connected to *life* (Leibniz: *living force*). So we can extend 'dynamic' to include the quieter forces of life (e.g., being alive, awake, alert). [More work needed here]

5. The key role of dynamic sensations

- Dynamic sensations (e.g., sensations of tension, pressure, ..., the sheer feeling of life) are set upon the primordial landscape of a body-image. This allows them to provide the needed qualitative mediation in proprioception.
- Dynamic sensations are indispensable for understanding space. *Space*, including body-space, cannot be understood in isolation from *force*, because what is at issue is *physical* space, not geometrical space. (McDowell seems to be too 'geometrical'.)

5. The key role of dynamic sensations: proprioception and touch

• Proprioception and touch cannot be understood apart

- Proprioception and touch cannot be understood apart from each other. They are *made for each other*.
- They are the only two senses that are *necessary* for an animal. All the other senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste) are contingent.
- They are often in extremely intimate cooperation. A key topic here: *spatial exploration by touch* (e.g., running a hand along an edge). This requires that tactual space (exterior) and proprioceptive space (interior) be *identical*.

5. The key role of dynamic sensations: the *unity* of exterior and interior space

- Exterior space and interior space must not be conceived as two distinct spaces — on pain of body-solipsism (Merleau-Ponty), but as two modes of understanding of *the same single space*.
- In Kantian terms: we need something like a transcendental deduction of the objective validity of body-space.
- Dynamic sensations are crucial achieving such a deduction. (O'Shaughnessy's work is seriously incomplete here.) [Still work in progress]

Thank you!