

Time and the Body Schema

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1. Introduction.

In the traditions of phenomenological psychiatry it is not seldom stated that melancholia and mania involve some *disturbance of time consciousness*. For example, T. Fuchs has recently argued that melancholics suffer from a "desynchronization" of personal and collective time.¹ This poster discusses from an analytical-philosophical point of view what the French psychiatrist Henri Ey says about time consciousness in mania and melancholia, concentrating on the question, "Which concept of 'consciousness' is implied by his position?"

Henri Ey (1900-1977) was and is a very influential figure in French psychiatry.² He wrote important textbooks in clinical psychiatry³ and several theoretical works where he advanced his "organo-dynamic" view of the mind-brain. His *magnus opus* is the two-volume treatise about hallucinations that was published four years before his death.⁴ Ey was also very well versed in contemporary philosophical thought and made interesting contributions to the philosophy of mind, especially in *La Conscience* (1963)⁵, the second edition of which was translated to English in 1978 as *Consciousness*.⁶ The present poster draws heavily on the formulations in *Consciousness*.

Among psychiatric disturbances of consciousness, Ey distinguishes between *destructurations of the field of consciousness* (approximately = breakdowns of the organisation of the perceptual field) and *alterations/alienations of the self*. To the former category belong (among others) dreaming, confusional states, hallucinations and disturbances of the body image, but also melancholia and mania. The latter are said to be "destructurations" at the highest organisational level of the field of consciousness and to essentially involve a pathology of time consciousness. To quote just a few formulations, melancholia is "*the pathetic immobility of a time which is suspended from the irreversibility of the past mistake, the syncope of a time which can no longer flow, from which any movement of hope has been abolished*".⁷ For the manic, on the other hand, "*the future is there, as if all possibilities were equally possible*"; manic experience "*refuses to pause*".⁸

2. Brands of consciousness

Analytical philosophers tend to distinguish between two main uses of the term "conscious" and its derivatives, or as one might also express it, two concepts of consciousness.

Here we must pause to consider a few linguistic facts. The French term *conscience* covers not only *consciousness* in the ordinary sense(s) of the English word, but also the English *conscience*. Looking at two other major European languages, German and Swedish, both have two words here: *Bewusstsein/Gewissen* and *medvetande/samvete*. Again, the German and Swedish terms *Bewusstsein* and *medvetande*, respectively, have not one but two counterparts in English, *consciousness* and *awareness*. For these linguistic reasons it can be quite difficult to transfer a semantical discussion about consciousness from one European language to another. But these difficulties can be overcome if one considers that the point of making a conceptual distinction is not to produce lexical definitions of *terms*, but to distinguish between different *concepts*, which in turn delimit related but distinct *phenomena*. In this spirit, what I am saying next should be taken as an attempt to clarify a certain cluster of concepts which in English usage happen to be attached more or less loosely to terms such as "conscious", "consciously", "awareness" and so on.

The first concept of consciousness, then, is the purely *cognitive* one in which consciousness of a fact is the same as *knowledge* of that fact. In English, it is common to use "aware" in this cognitive sense. Cognitive consciousness need not involve having any actual thoughts or, indeed, any experiences at all. You may for example say about a person who is deep asleep and has not set the alarm, "She is well aware of the fact that she has to get up at 7 o'clock, and she always awakens in time without a clock". The other use is the *experiential* one where being conscious does imply having a phenomenal experience of some kind. Hearing a loud sound and seeing a beautiful landscape involves experiential consciousness of the auditory and visual kind, respectively.

3. *Time and the body schema*

However, neither of these uses of "consciousness" seems to capture what Ey and other phenomenological psychiatrists intend when they argue that, e.g., melancholia involves a disturbance of time consciousness. What they describe in their patients is not any lacking *knowledge* of temporal relations, neither a pathological *experience* of time – at least not *only* such an experience. Pathological experiences of time (e.g., a feeling that time runs very slowly) are found in neurological conditions, but the essential disturbance of "time consciousness" in a melancholic patient seems rather to involve the subject's *intentions to act* – she dwells in past actions (especially, of course, in her failures and missed opportunities) and does not invest her energy in the present situation, the possibilities of which she cannot see. In what sense is this a *disturbance of consciousness*?

To answer this question, I will first try to clarify briefly the temporal aspects of the "body schema" as defined by Henry Head and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Surprisingly, although *The Phenomenology of Perception*⁹ contains long sections both about the body schema and about temporality, Merleau-Ponty does not discuss their interrelations at length. However, it should be obvious that typical manifestations of the body schema such as the ability to catch an approaching ball, or to coordinate hand and eye in exploring an object, or to play violin in a quartet, involve a *mastery of time* to the same extent as they involve a mastery of space. If you don't know exactly *when* the C sharp is to be played, it does not help much that you know exactly *where* to place your finger to produce it. Moreover, for an experienced violinist these items are obviously both matters of *practical* knowledge, and hence of the body schema. So, if there is a primordial space which is accessed by means of the body schema, there is also a primordial time in which this space is accessed. Or better, the body schema typically unfolds in primordial space-time.

4. *Control consciousness*

The manifestations of the body schema are partly unconscious and automatic (for example, in most of our regulation of bodily posture) but partly conscious, such as in quartet playing or when trying to keep the upright posture when balancing over a field of large stones. Well, in which sense is *consciousness* involved in the latter case? Obviously we are not here referring to consciousness in the cognitive sense. It is perhaps less obvious that we are not talking about experiential consciousness, since some experiences are usually involved in the two activities I have given as examples. But when balancing over a field of stones, we are not *only* having conscious experiences of ourselves balancing, we *balance consciously*. And while playing the violin, the violinist normally does not only have experiences of herself performing a piece of music (that would rather be characteristic of a state of depersonalization), but *consciously performs* it.

I suggest that in addition to cognitive and experiential ("phenomenal") consciousness, we should distinguish a third kind, namely *control consciousness*. Control consciousness is the mind's way of controlling and steering actions on a level above reflexes and automatisms. Here I would really have liked to continue in Swedish since there are many good examples of Swedish phrases referring to control consciousness, for example "Jag gjorde det inte medvetet" (meaning *I did not do it intentionally*) and "Det var inte en tillfällighet, utan ett medvetet val av mig" (*It was no accident, but a deliberate choice on my part*). In ordinary English language there may be fewer such uses, but I think that control consciousness is referenced when we say "I drove the car all the way home without being aware of it". To be sure, you had *experiences* of driving all the way home (since you were not unconscious), and surely, you *knew* that you were on your way home; but you did not *consciously control* the driving (since your driving automatisms were sufficiently well developed to be allowed to take over).

5. *An excursus on Husserl*

I would like to argue that Husserl's famous analyses of internal time consciousness¹⁰ are incomplete at best, because he never pays enough attention to the control aspect of consciousness. The complicated structure of "retentions" (referring to the immediate past) and "protentions" (anticipating the immediate future) which Husserl postulates is just not plausible if interpreted only as an *experiential* structure. If every present impression had to be accompanied by a retentional experience not only of past impressions, but also of past retentional experiences as Husserl's theory would demand, the theatre of experiential consciousness would tend to become overcrowded very soon.¹¹ Also, one may seriously doubt that there is a protentional *experience* corresponding to each short-term expectation that one can be said to have. I would rather say that as a rule, short-term expectations are not represented in experience at all. The fact that frustrated expectations tend to lead to lively experiences is quite another matter. At least very often, the consciousness underlying such episodes is *control* consciousness – we try to control the course of events, and the experience of frustrated expectation occurs when the attempt fails (we tried to thread on a step which turned out not to exist).

Should Husserl's analysis then be re-interpreted as saying that there is a *cognitive* structure of retentions and protentions – i.e., as a theory to the effect that we at each moment *know* what we experienced a short while ago (and, more vaguely, what is going to happen)? No, since that would be more like a rehearsal of what needs explaining rather than an explanation of anything. My suggestion is instead that the concept of *control* consciousness is of essential importance if we are going to understand Husserl's theory of internal time consciousness in a way which makes it at least somewhat plausible.

Now, the relevance of control consciousness to the analysis of *protentions* is rather obvious: our apprehension of what is to come is often tightly coupled to our actions and thereby to control consciousness (and to the body schema). But what about *retentions*?

6. *What memory is not for*

To say that control consciousness is essentially involved in our apprehension of the past may seem quite paradoxical. Of course we cannot consciously control the past! Hence *memory* as a mental function (or set of mental functions) seems to be independent of *action*.

However, if we consider the biological significance of memory, its point is certainly not to allow us to look into the past, but to help us control the future. This fact is also manifest in the way our perceptual field is structured while we perform an action. If, for example, you stretch out and bend your arm in an attempt to catch a snake which has just hidden behind a stone (don't do that!), the success of your action is wholly dependent on the fact that in some sense, you *remember* seeing the snake vanishing behind the stone. But this "retentional" component of your perception is not realized in the form of a memory image of where the snake was a second ago, but in the form of a perception of the snake *as being behind the stone now* – or rather, *as being there in the immediate future*, since that is when your hand is going to be there. In the same way, the violinist's practical knowledge of which note to play next, and when, is surely based on her short-term memory; but what she *hears* with her mind's ear is normally the next note to be played, not the previous ones. In short, retentions are normally translated immediately into protentions which underly and guide our actions. That's how the body schema unfolds in space-time.

But surely we do often *remember* things in the sense that we have conscious memory acts directed towards the past? Yes, of course, but I would argue that memory in this sense does not exist because Nature has benevolently given us the opportunity to enjoy mental slideshows of the past. Instead, it is because the primary mechanism sketched above does not always suffice for controlling the future. If an action plan fails at the level of primordial perception, we take recourse to more advanced mental operations which typically involve rehearsals of longer actions sequences – maybe going all the way back to where things started (why am I trying to catch snakes?).

7. *Is consciousness of time disturbed in melancholia and mania?*

In another context I have introduced the term "practical perception" for perceptions which lead to practical knowledge of what has to be done, and which thereby involves the body schema.¹² What I have been saying in this poster is that not only is practical perception essentially forward-looking; it also constitutes the most fundamental form of time consciousness on which all other forms depend. I think that in a very general way, this fact (if it is a fact) may make it more comprehensible that melancholia and mania could be said to involve disturbances of time consciousness. Maybe the psychomotor inhibition of depression and the disinhibition of mania could be described as certain kinds of fault in that organisation of the perceptual field which makes it possible for us to *see* what can and should be done? Isn't melancholia *the inability to see what can be done*, and mania *the inability to see what should not be done*? I am here talking about seeing in a literal sense, not about seeing in some loose sense of "knowing" or "understanding": if Ey's hypothesis is correct, bipolar affective disorder is a disorder of (the field of) perception, not (or at least not primarily) of cognition.

To fully understand and evaluate Ey's thesis about the nature of time consciousness in melancholia and mania, one will have to go deeper into what he says about the constitution of time consciousness in general. Specifically, one should look closely into his view that what philosophers (after William James) use to call "the specious present", and which they sometimes call "the experienced Now", presupposes a kind of *spatialization* of time which, moreover, is necessary if we are to be able to perceive the Now as extended and thereby to exert our capabilities of control consciousness at the level of basic practical perception.¹³ If Ey is correct on this point (and I tend to think that he is), he has contributed not only to our psychiatric understanding of the affective disorders but also to the philosophical understanding of that central enigma of consciousness, how perception of change is possible.

Acknowledgments

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References

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² For biographical details see <http://psydoc-fr.broca.inserm.fr/Ey/accueilEy.html>

³ H. Ey, *Études psychiatriques, I-III*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer 1952, 1950, 1954.

⁴ H. Ey, *Traité des hallucinations, I-II*. Paris: Masson, 1973.

⁵ H. Ey, *La Conscience*. Paris: P.U.F., 1963.

⁶ H. Ey, *Consciousness*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1978. (Transl. John Flodstrom.)

⁷ H. Ey, *Consciousness*, p. 80.

⁸ H. Ey, *Consciousness*, p. 81.

⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*. Paris 1945. English translation: *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 1962.

¹⁰ Husserl writes about time consciousness in many places, and changes his views several times. I am not referring to any of his views specifically but to what is common for them.

¹¹ I am in complete agreement with Dainton's analysis on this point. See B. Dainton, *Stream of Consciousness*. London: Routledge, 2000.

¹² See H. Malmgren, Rorschach's idea of "movement" responses in the light of recent philosophy and psychology of perception. *Rorschachiana* 24 (2000), 1-27. – To make another connection: practical perception is involved in the perceiving of *affordances* (as defined by the Gestalt psychologists and James J. Gibson).

¹³ To be sure, Ey's views are not always easy to understand, and I am not quite certain that this is exactly what he means.