

The Autobiography of Consciousness and the New Cognitive Existentialism

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I. Introduction

While the only thing in common between the juicy memoirs of Liz Smith in [Natural Blonde](#) and Steven Pinker's [How the Mind Works](#) might seem to be the mutual distinction of holding a place (at some point in time) on the *New York Times Bestseller List*, they do share at least one other large project in common: that is, they both make claims toward describing the constitution of the person as a "subject." While autobiography functions at the most particular level by ordering the incidences and intimacies of the specific, individual life into the subject of narrative coherence, cognitive science works at the most general level by attempting to describe the cognitive apparatus that enables the possibility of subjective mental life in the first place. Thus, although they might seem to embody different occupational endeavors in their disciplinary constitutions—one consisting of a "soft," subjective literary expression in the tradition of the humanities and one embracing the "hard," objective methodology of the sciences—autobiography and cognitive science both lay claim to explicating the same intellectual terrain: the description of first-person subjective mental experience in a public, third-person form.

By generic definition, autobiography purports to bring to light the hidden, mental experiences of the famous self in an attempt to help the reader understand who that famous person *really* is. It also promises a new understanding of its subject—the famous self—by virtue of its depiction of the self's perspective on its own particular set of experiences. That is, the purpose in reading the autobiography is not so much to conduct a readerly fact-finding mission (though that may be a very pragmatic account of much readerly motivation) but, rather, to find out what the famous self thinks about the set of facts that constitutes his/her life. Thus, through the process of reading about a self making "itself" its own subject, the reader supposedly gains intimate access to the "real" self—something less casually termed its "subjectivity"—by gaining access to its second-order reflection about its first-order self. Although the specific "subject" of an autobiography may vary from Winston Churchill to Hilary Clinton, the autobiographical form, nevertheless, makes the depiction of subjectivity (itself) the "real" subject of the entire genre. From this perspective, then, autobiography is interesting not because it reveals the self (as such) but rather because it reveals the qualitative experience of what it is like to be one particular self (through the vehicle of second-order reflection). Therefore, that most personal of literary forms—the

autobiography—also paradoxically functions as one of the most public. As a generic experiment, it attempts to create a quasi-objective expression of that which is supposed to be irremediably first-person: the qualitative nature of a particular subjectivity or, in Thomas Nagel's classic formulation, "what it's like to be" someone else.

Likewise, cognitive science also purports to illuminate the nature of subjective mental experience. Developed out of a negative response to behavioral and psychological models of mental experience which seemed to fall short in their predictive ability in the "real world," cognitive science presupposes a common cognitive apparatus that, when fully described by rigorous, objective science, will be able to explain the general nature of subjective human mental experience and its relationship to the "mind." Although cognitivism makes no claim to interpolate all of the particulars and specifics that constitute an individual, human subjectivity, it does, however, claim that it will eventually be able to provide a generalized account of how the mind—the "organ" of subjectivity (if you will)—emerges from the brain's processing of those particular details. It maintains that the explication of the rules of mental operation will suffice as a sufficient description of the nature of subjective mental experience. While it is by no means an uncontested science, cognitive science (like the genre of autobiography), nevertheless, makes a tenacious epistemological claim about the tractability of subjective mental experience and its availability for public consumption through the means of objective science. In a manner which recalls the generic constraints of autobiography, cognitive science promises to provide a conceptual map of how the brain creates a mind from its subjective, first-person experiences—i.e. its autobiographical material—and, thereby, to explain the nature of subjectivity (or consciousness) in general.

However, for certain cognitive scientists, philosophers, and folk psychological theorists, this conception of "cognitive science" ignores the central criterion of what constitutes mental experience in the first place: i.e. that mental experience is, by its very nature, entirely private and, thus, inaccessible from the vantage point of both a generalizing science and a representational autobiography. The logic of the critique runs as follows: because the mental is, by definition, bounded by the first-person perspective, it is, necessarily, understood only privately from within that particular first-person perspective. That is, the subjective can only be understood subjectively and is illegible in the scientific classification of mental rules or through the autobiographical transformation of the self into a third-person object. From this perspective, both autobiography and cognitive science make the mistake of misconstruing the second-order representation of mental experience as an equivalent substitution for the first-order qualitative experience of mental events ineffably embodied within the first-person perspective. In other words, both accounts are

problematic because they replace the actual mental, subjective event with a mere representational construct. Ultimately, then, this critique argues that the attempt to reconstruct subjectivity through a third-person rubric is to have already transformed the object of study into something other than what it really is. And, thus, what looks like a new problem for the new science of cognitivism is, indeed, just another iteration of a very old problem: Plato's problem with literary representation in general.

Although much empirical cognitive science appears—by its continual equation of symbolic representation with cognition—to ignore its tendentious position within this centuries-old debate about representation, I want to use the remainder of this paper to examine a certain, newer branch of cognitive science that attempts to operate within this modality of “autobiography” in order to solve the inadequacies of the traditional AI account of subjectivity and mental activity. Because much of cognitive science (in general) is committed to a computational account of mind, it tends to imagine a complete dissolution of the subject into pure mechanical process. (And, indeed, cognitive science is notoriously rife with subject-dissolving predictions in some of its more zealous claims about the imminent viability of machine-based AI, the theoretical possibility of disembodied intelligence instantiated in any material platform merely by the operation of the right kind of symbolic logic, or in the connectionist's complex of semi-intelligent nodes that belie the existence of a single, transcendent awareness in the form of a mental subject.) However, cognitive neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, in his most recent book entitled [The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness](#), embraces a more humanist perspective and attempts to reclaim a center stage for consciousness in the cognitive movement by characterizing it as the product of a representational structure of human autobiographical experience. As this paper will briefly explicate, Damasio argues for a bifurcated account of consciousness which bases self-conscious awareness around a fundamentally second-order, representational structure that is spawned as a result of the first-order's accrual of autobiographical experience as a human organism. In effect, self-consciousness is spawned as a kind of post facto by-product that emerges from two interpolated orders of representation. Consequently, I argue that Damasio's theoretical construct recalls the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre who also conceives of experience as generative of consciousness (or subjectivity) rather than the more normative notion that consciousness (or subjectivity) generates the subject's experience of the world. Moreover, I will also argue that, although Sartre's model appears to be Damasio's direct theoretical progenitor, his model ultimately unhinges Damasio's because it explicates Damasio's awkward insistence on maintaining full-fledged, subjective consciousness in the face of Sartre's revelation of consciousness as entirely empty and necessarily self-representational. In short: Sartre's account proleptically reveals the extent to which Damasio and the rest of the embodiment school re-enact the same representational paradigm of consciousness that they

supposedly work against in their operational critique of normative cognitive science. In effect, it explicates their model's specious appendage of full-fledged, liberal subjectivity onto bare representation as an erroneous and opaque attempt to bridge the explanatory gap.¹

II. Damasio's Existential Cognitivism

In brief, Damasio argues that extended consciousness (or as I have been loosely terming it "subjectivity") emerges through the homeostatic production of a series of bodily maps which present back to the human organism a representational record of its activities and an account of how those activities have changed the actual state of the system. In the Damasian schema, consciousness (or subjectivity) is not the fundamental metaphysical condition of the human perspective but, rather, an emergent condition of full-fledged personhood which the healthy organism comes to narrate for itself. In other words, the human person is not born into subjectivity and consciousness (as such) but, rather, fine-tunes itself into retrospective, conscious subjectivity by creating a bodily based, autobiographical record of its experiences with the world. Based on years of research with victims of stroke, amnesia, trauma-induced aphasia, and other neurological disorders, Damasio constructs a stratified model of consciousness that encompasses varying degrees of wakefulness and basic life processes. Although he locates many and various degrees of consciousness and awareness in the human organism, Damasio primarily splits his account into two halves: "core consciousness" and "extended consciousness." Core consciousness consists of the most basic level of wakefulness and attention that is shared by most living beings and is the most stable layer of the human organism in that it remains a dynamically maintained state throughout the lifespan of the person. Although it is limited to the "here and now" of the present, core consciousness undergirds extended consciousness by acting as the permanent foundation from which continually transient versions of self emerge. That is, for Damasio, core consciousness continuously spawns an entity called the "core self" that emerges through the body's basic interaction with objects in the world. And, although core consciousness is stable, the "core self" it generates continually morphs from one moment to the next as a mapped response to encountered stimuli.²

By contrast, extended consciousness emerges through the organism's ability to generate a stable narrative about itself and to integrate the individual instances of the core self's "here and now" into an autobiographical identity. While extended consciousness encompasses all the usual higher cognitive processes, functions, and autobiographical memories we typically ascribe to human capability, it is also, more importantly, a term for the human organism's ability to construct a coherent narrative about itself from the experiences encoded by homeostatic representation that the core self has generated in its interactions with the world. As Damasio conceives it,

I propose that we become conscious when the [human] organism's representation devices exhibit a specific kind of wordless knowledge—the knowledge that the organism's own state has been changed by an object—and when such knowledge occurs along with the salient representation of an object. The sense of self in the act of knowing an object is an infusion of new knowledge, continuously created within the brain as long as 'objects,' actually present or recalled, interact with the organism and cause it to change. (25)

In effect, extended consciousness is a function of the organism's autobiographical impulse which creates an extended sense of self, or full-fledged "subjectivity," through a second-order representation of the bodily results of the organism's interactions with its environment. To quote Damasio again:

The sense of self which emerges in core consciousness is the core self, a transient entity, ceaselessly re-created for each and every object with which the brain interacts. Our traditional notion of self, however, is linked to the idea of identity and corresponds to a nontransient collection of unique facts and ways of being which characterize a person. My term for that entity is the autobiographical self. The autobiographical self depends on systematized memories of situations in which core consciousness was involved in the knowing of the most invariant characteristics of an organism's life--who you were born to, where, when, your likes and dislikes, the way you usually react to a problem or a conflict, your name, and so on. I use the term autobiographical memory to denote the organized record of the main aspects of an organism's biography. (17-18)

Hence, in Damasio's account, autobiographical experience would, counter-intuitively, seem to authorize subjectivity and extended consciousness (not vice versa)—the human organism's bodily autobiography spawns "itself" a subjective, conscious, human person. Reversing the more normative conception of subjective consciousness as the fundamental condition from which humans necessarily experience the world embedded within a private, first-person perspective, Damasio argues, instead, that consciousness (or, in my terms, subjectivity) is a derivative product of an organism's retrospective, autobiographical representation of its experiences in the world. That is, conscious subjectivity results from an odd kind of representational "interiority" which is, literally, an objective, third-person perspective delivered upon that which has already happened to the organism. For Damasio, the process of autobiographical recollection invokes extended consciousness; consciousness (itself) does not provide the experiential ground from which autobiography is composed. In other words, as human subjects, "we are always hopelessly late for consciousness" in that "by the time [we] get 'delivery' of consciousness for a given object, things have been ticking away in the machinery of [the] brain for what would seem like an eternity to a molecule--if molecules could think" (127). As conscious human subjects, then, we are also always hopelessly late for our own experience of the world.

Consequently, one way of thinking about how "consciousness" and "subjectivity" operate in Damasio's schema is to view them as narrative constructs of a spontaneous story that inscribes its own subjects into being. And, indeed, Damasio's frequently hyperbolic metaphors describing the evolution of consciousness as a literary process seem to bear out his tendency to reconfigure consciousness, or subjectivity, as a third-person, quasi-autobiographical story which writes itself through the body's mediation:

Consciousness begins when brains acquire the power, the simple power I must add, of telling a story without words, the story that there is life ticking away in an organism, and that the states of the living organism, within body bounds, are continuously being altered by encounters with objects or events in its environment, or, for that matter, by thoughts and by internal adjustments of the life process. Consciousness emerges when this primordial story—the story of an object causally changing the state of the body—can be told using the universal nonverbal vocabulary of body signals. The apparent self emerges as the feeling of a feeling. When the story is first told, spontaneously, without it ever having been requested, and forevermore after that when the story is repeated, knowledge about what the organism is living through automatically emerges as the answer to a question never asked. From that moment on, we begin to know. (30-1)

Thus, in addition to his specific equation of consciousness with the far-ranging sweep of an "epic novel" (17), Damasio clearly conceives of "consciousness" (or subjectivity) as a kind of autobiographical story that writes itself through the mediation of the human organism. In effect, humans become mere characters or second-order, extra-diegetic byproducts in a play of spontaneous narrativity both from and about the body.

III. Damasio's Theoretical Progenitor: Jean-Paul Sartre

As theoretically cutting-edge as this re-conceptualization might seem, however, Damasio's imagination of consciousness as an inscription of a kind of originary narrative condition is not without precedent in twentieth-century thought. Indeed, almost three decades prior to Damasio's work, Jean-Paul Sartre, in his autobiography entitled [The Words](#), draws almost entirely the same conclusion:

Viewed from the height of my tomb, my birth appeared to me as a necessary evil, as a quite provisional embodiment that prepared for my transfiguration: in order to be reborn, I had to write; in order to write, I needed a brain, eyes, arms. When the work was done, those organs would be automatically resorbed. Around 1955, a larva would burst open, twenty-five folio butterflies would emerge from it, flapping all their pages, and would go and alight on a shelf of the National Library. Those butterflies would be none other than I: I, twenty-five volumes, eighteen thousand pages of text, three

hundred engravings, including a portrait of the author. My bones are made of leather and cardboard, my parchment-skinned flesh smells of glue and mushrooms, I sit in state through a hundred thirty pounds of paper, thoroughly at ease. I am reborn, I at last become a whole man, thinking, talking, singing, thundering, a man who asserts himself with the peremptory inertia of matter. (194)

Far from wanting to embrace something like Damasio's overtly materialist account of embodied consciousness, Sartre, nevertheless, (problematically) characterizes his own version of extended consciousness³ as the effect of a spontaneous narrativity which seeks out a literal, material embodiment (even if only temporarily) in order to effect itself as an "I."⁴ Not only does he conceive himself to be the "precipitate of language" (192), Sartre characterizes himself as a book which is concurrently inscribed into existence through the process of the writing he, himself, performs. His physical corpus is needed only insofar as it mediates his *writing's* existence in the world: to tell the autobiography of Jean-Paul Sartre is, ultimately, only to tell the autobiography of "the words" he has written and the temporary material body they effect. In effect, Sartre's autobiography is not so much the autobiography of the famous existentialist philosopher as it is the autobiography of his writing's instantiated and embodied subject.

While this role reversal should certainly come as no surprise from the philosopher who earlier wrote [The Transcendence of the Ego](#) (1936/7)⁵ and [Being and Nothingness](#) (1943) and, thereby, re-conceived ontology in the existentialist terms that have become infamous as a kind of lay avant-gardism, I want to argue along with philosopher-critic Kathleen Wider that Sartre's existentialist philosophy is, perhaps, more central to embodiment theory than has been previously recognized.⁶ Because Sartre re-imagines the human subject as a completely free agent with no essential identity, he also inherently problematizes "experience" in a manner similar to Damasio.⁷ Where commonsense bespeaks a subject who experiences the world, existentialism (as well as embodiment theory) bespeaks *of a subject* created through an "experiencing" of the world. Consequently, existentialism also bespeaks a version of subjectivity that is created retrospectively through the specter of a perpetually non-present self that is, nevertheless, represented as being present to its own consciousness.⁸ In other words, existentialism disarticulates subjectivity from experience and, likewise, reduces consciousness to something close to Damasio's spontaneous, subject-inscribing narrativity.

Leaving aside an explication of Sartre's full ontology (a project which is simply beyond the scope and time constraints of this paper), I want to examine (briefly) Sartre's notion of "all consciousness as self-consciousness" in order to draw out its striking commonality and its striking divergence with Damasio's account of consciousness in order to gesture toward how deeply embodiment philosophy (as a

whole) seems to be indebted to his prior deconstruction of the notion of “experience.”⁹ More importantly, I will try to wrap up this paper by arguing that an un-sanitized version of Sartre—as opposed to Wider’s recuperative reading of Sartre which tries to characterize him as a closet-embodiment philosopher who misunderstands the trajectory of his own project—provides an important proleptic corrective to both Wider and Damasio in that it manages to explicate how utterly contingent both the “body” and “consciousness” become in embodied accounts of consciousness.

IV. Sartre’s Existential “Embodiment”

Perhaps the most accessible version of the Sartrean account of consciousness is his own autobiographical description of his first moment of awareness as, itself, a kind of doubled-up moment of regained consciousness that, heretofore, had not been present:

Were it not for the luck of that double death-struggle, I would have been exposed to the difficulties of a late weaning. Sick, weaned by force, I was prevented by fever and stupor from feeling the last snip of the scissors that cuts the bonds between mother and child. I sank into a chaotic world full of simple hallucinations and defaced idols. Upon the death of my father, Anne Marie and I awoke from a common nightmare. I got better. But we were victims of a misunderstanding: she returned lovingly to a child she had never really left; I regained consciousness in the lap of a stranger. (16-7)

Following upon the five or so pages of stridently de-personalized genealogy that begins Sartre’s autobiography, he literally describes his actual awakening to the world and his figurative emplacement within the autobiography (itself) as a moment in which his primal awareness emerges fundamentally as a *re-awareness* that is shaped and spawned by the death of his father. Consciousness becomes present in its first moment as a moment of re-presence in which the subject, Jean-Paul Sartre, comes to know his life as if he were a third-person stranger to that which was already running along. In this vein, Sartre very much prefigures Damasio’s radical disjunction of consciousness and experience in that the body is already up and running before consciousness-as-re-consciousness irrupts.¹⁰

As this autobiographical passage suggests and (the earlier) [Transcendence of the Ego](#) bears out, Sartre’s philosophical version of consciousness is similarly concatenated upon itself.¹¹ Sartre maintains a bifurcated account of consciousness that is roughly equivalent to Damasio’s. It consists of an “unreflected level” where the body immediately serves as “the illusory fulfillment of the [empty] I-concept” (91) and a “reflective level” which intuits an ego and gains an intimacy with the psychic arena that is necessarily absent at the more primordial level (91). Although Damasio

and Sartre might quibble on some of the fine points of distinction between their two models, they both basically espouse a model of consciousness which views the fundamental level of consciousness—the “core” level in Damasio and the “unreflected” level in Sartre—as a bodily encounter with the world and the secondary level—the “extended” level in Damasio and the “reflective” level in Sartre—as a self-aware order of secondary representation.¹² In both accounts, consciousness emerges, in post facto fashion, from the transformation of subjectless bodily experience into secondary, self-aware representation.

Thus, to a certain extent, Sartre seems remarkably sympathetic to Damasio’s embodiment project. Where Sartre’s account differs from Damasio’s—and I think this is an important difference that has been historically elided in the casting of Sartre’s philosophy as mere empty nihilism—is in his formulation of an elusive, emergent version of “subjectivity” (for lack of a better term) that is nothing like the humanist, liberal subjectivity that Damasio, George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and others try to maintain. Even though both share the same fundamental apparatus of consciousness, Damasio conceives of subjectivity as a kind of evolved consciousness capable of producing something like the “Great Works of Man.” Although Damasio resists characterizing his model in teleological terms, he does pay implicit homage to the genetic advantages levied on organisms like humans who learn to manipulate their environment to their own desired ends. Moreover, he thinks (and not at all unreasonably I might add) that consciousness further spawns language, ethics, personal development, and, hence, all the cultural and intellectual achievements of the modern world. In effect, extended consciousness becomes, for Damasio, a pinnacle achievement that humans (and, on a sliding scale, other animals) are lucky to have.

Damasio’s model, however, is not without significant complication. Although it is pragmatically persuasive in its accord with everyday life and with a rather banal intellectual positivism that views humankind in a progressive manner, Damasio’s model also fluctuates ambiguously between this highly evolved, humanist account of subjectivity and a certain biological determinism emanating from the emotions. Even though Damasio thinks that culture and awareness modify the biological pre-settings of emotions as the human organism fine-tunes itself into subjectivity, he stills thinks that emotions are “complicated collections of chemical and neural responses” that have a “regulatory role to play” (52). In short, he thinks that

... we are about as effective at stopping an emotion as we are at preventing a sneeze. We can try to prevent the expression of an emotion, and we may succeed in part but not in full. Some of us, under the appropriate cultural influence, get to be quite good at it, but in essence what we achieve is the ability to disguise some of the external manifestations of emotion without ever being able to block the automated changes that occur in the viscera and internal milieu. (49)

In other words, even though consciousness arises through the bodily chain of biological experience and is (inexplicably) able to turn itself around and conduct its affairs in the world in a grand way, it is also simultaneously and continuously dictated by the body's internal state. Thus, even though the human subject emerges through its experiences in the world and, subsequently, re-programs certain settings and features within the body becoming ever more effective at what it does, it would seem that the pre-subjective body (and not consciousness) is still determining the course of events. Because consciousness is always late for the body's experience in Damasio's model, extended consciousness figures, inadvertently and paradoxically, as a highly evolved, yet utterly extraneous evolutionary achievement. In Damasio's schema, subjectivity starts to look like nothing more than memory and is limited to knowing only *the feeling of what has already happened in the body*. Thus, despite the fact that Damasio presents his model with a positivistic gloss, it actually appears more nihilistic than Sartre's absolute freedom in that he reduces subjectivity (or extended consciousness) to the mere role of bodily witness.

Where Damasio awkwardly stretches subjectivity across the two poles of extended consciousness and biological determinism, Sartre undoes subjectivity altogether by characterizing it as the development of a sham ego which keeps consciousness from viewing its own spontaneous and non-necessary nature. As Sartre notes in [The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existential Theory of Consciousness](#),

There is no longer an 'inner life' in the sense in which Brunshvicg opposes 'inner life' and 'spiritual life,' because there is no longer anything which is an *object* and which can at the same time partake of the intimacy of consciousness. Doubts, remorse, the so-called 'mental crises of consciousness,' etc.—in short, all the content of intimate diaries—become *sheer performance*. And perhaps we could derive here some sound precepts of moral discretion. But, in addition, we must bear in mind that from this point of view my emotions and my states, my ego itself, cease to be my exclusive property. To be precise: up to now a radical distinction has been made between the objectivity of a spatiotemporal thing or of an external truth, and the subjectivity of psychical 'states.' It seemed as if the subject had a privileged status with respect to his own states. (93-4)

Although both Sartre and Damasio subscribe to the utter spontaneousness of consciousness, what becomes remarkable about consciousness, for Sartre, is that it remains fundamentally "other" to human subjectivity (or ego). That is, on Sartre's account, subjectivity is delimited to the ego—a false construction which is created in order to mask the spontaneous and impersonal nature of consciousness from itself. To quote Sartre again at length:

The reflective attitude is correctly expressed in this famous sentence by Rimbaud (in the letter of the seer): 'I is *an other*.' The context proves that he simply meant that

the spontaneity of consciousness could not emanate from the *I*, the spontaneity *goes toward* the *I*, rejoins the *I*, lets the *I* be glimpsed beneath its limpid density, but is itself given above all as *individuated* and *impersonal* spontaneity. The commonly accepted thesis, according to which our thoughts would gush from an impersonal unconscious and would ‘personalize’ themselves by becoming conscious, seems to us a coarse and materialistic interpretation of a correct intuition. It has been maintained by psychologists who have very well understood that consciousness does not ‘come out’ of the *I*, but who could not accept the idea of a spontaneity producing itself. (97-8)

In effect, Sartre eliminates the privacy of mental experience and, as such, would seem to eliminate the category of the mental altogether.

In addition to Sartre’s seeming elimination of private mental experience, he also (and, perhaps, more importantly for the purposes of this paper) reduces the body to serving as a “visible and tangible symbol for the [non-present] I” (90). Because Sartre thinks that consciousness “exists the body” (21), the body comes to mark both the absence of the subjective “I” and the co-presence of consciousness-as-negation-of-the-body-object.¹³ In effect, the body and its specific consciousness become inextricable, representational proxies of Sartre’s larger ontological schema of consciousness (in general) such that the body’s particularity comes to count only as a representation of its individuated but, nevertheless, impersonal spontaneity. For Sartre, the subjective “I” becomes a marker of a bad faith effort to maintain the distinguishability of the body, the person, the subjective, or (even) the mental in the face of consciousness’s nihilating circle of self-referentiality with respect to the body.

V. Conclusion

While I think it is important not to juxtapose Sartre and Damasio in an effort to see which model of consciousness is “more correct”—something that would be impossible to adjudicate in any case—I do think that a comparison of the two models is illuminating precisely because of the radical divergence that ensues from such similar foundations. Even though Damasio obviously gains the operational advantage over Sartre with a half-century of technological advancement and a highly acclaimed career in the neurological sciences, Sartre’s model is an important conceptual partner in that it delineates a certain conceptual fuzziness and ambiguity implicit in Damasio’s model. Indeed, what Sartre’s model lacks in methodological veracity, it makes up for in its uncanny ability to foreground Damasio’s decision to hang on to something like full-blooded subjectivity in the face of an almost entirely biologically-determined model. Sartre’s absolute dismissal of the subjective and his relegation of the body to serving as a symbol for the fictive, non-present “I” seem far closer to Damasio’s problematic emotive automaton than he (Damasio) would care to admit.

If Sartre can be accused of clinging to an empty form of nihilism, he, nevertheless, also illuminates how Damasio clings to an empty form of mentalism. Ultimately, I think Sartre's evacuative treatment of both subjectivity and the body shows just how much Damasio and the rest of embodiment philosophy depends upon a transcendental Eureka! moment in order to make their account of second-order representation (their *feeling of what happens*) into a mind. Without explaining how a feeling comes to be "felt" by a subjective consciousness, Damasio inadvertently lands himself back in the AI laboratory. Insofar as Damasio and Sartre start from the same theoretical construct, I would argue that Sartre's emptying out of subjectivity, his diminishment of the body and his characterization of emotions, feelings and interior mental life as "sheer performance" (94) belies Damasio's unacknowledged transcendental commitment in his specification of the mental as *the feeling of a feeling*. Sartre's model demonstrates how quickly Damasio's account of the mind runs into the same problems that traditional AI accounts of the mind do—neither can specify what it is to have a mind in systemic terms that move beyond the representation of further representations. If anything, Sartre explicates how Damasio's account falls far short of actually explaining why it is that a representation of a representation counts as a legitimate "feeling" and not just a further iteration of representationality in the way that a symbolic AI operation would for him. Although Damasio proactively attempts to solve the problem of feelings by defining them as the private experience of the emotions and by conceiving of the emotions, themselves, as direct biological processes of the body, he never answers what I think would be Sartre's most pressing question for him: if you really think that we humans are characters that emerge from a kind of spontaneous storytelling by our bodies, aren't our feelings and private mental experiences also just fictions

Endnotes

1 The "explanatory gap" is a term of art within philosophy of mind and cognitive science signifying the irremediable difference between "mind" and "brain" or between "consciousness" and "brain." It is a term specifying the (as yet) methodological impossibility of specifying how a "brain" actually spawns or generates a given, particular "mind."

2 I want to be clear that "subjectivity" is not a word that Damasio uses and is, specifically, my own importation into his argument. However, I think that Damasio's account of "extended consciousness" is very much what a cross-disciplinary approach might term "subjectivity" and that to import "subjectivity" as a term of discussion is not unfair. As Damasio notes,

Consciousness is an entirely private, first-person phenomenon which occurs as part of the private, first-person we call mind. Consciousness and mind, however, are closely tied to external behaviors that can be observed by third persons. We all share these phenomena—mind, consciousness within mind, and behaviors—and we know quite well how they are intercorrelated, first because of our own self-analysis, second because of our natural propensity to analyze others. (13)

Moreover, I would argue that (as the rest of this paper will attempt to make clear), in effect, Damasio's conflation of subjectivity into a continuum of levels of consciousness flattens out the more radical bent of his argument by allowing the conceptual schema a certain theoretical naïvete with respect to the long-established debate surrounding the irremediably first-person nature of mental events. That is, Damasio's most fundamental notion of consciousness—our ability as organisms to experience the feeling of what happens in an event—starts to look like a self-actualizing, quasi-transcendental, Eureka! moment when he fails to account for why something like a second-order representation can be aware of feeling something that a first-order representation cannot. This is not meant to disparage Damasio for not solving the perennial problem of the explanatory gap—something that no other cognitive scientist, philosopher of mind, or citizen-at-large has managed to do either. Rather, it is merely to explicate the fact that Damasio's model, by virtue of his terminology, simply glosses over and refuses to recognize its own stake in one of the biggest theoretical problems in the history of philosophy. And, although my account might look tendentious toward Damasio's in that his account does (superficially) look as though it is sensitive to the issue of qualia in its specific address to the “feeling of what happens,” I would argue that the ball is still in Damasio's court waiting for him to explain two things: why it is that a second-order representation necessarily results in the self-awareness of “feeling” and not, say, the self-awareness of a “neural computation” and, secondly, what it is that a second-order of representation realizes (ontologically speaking) that a first-order doesn't? N.B. Henceforth, all references to Damasio will reference his book [The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness](#), Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, 1999.

3 Sartre's term is “reflected” consciousness. (Sartre's account of consciousness will be developed in further detail in this section.)

4 Kathleen Wider has a very smart and interesting discussion of Sartre's implicit (if unwanted) commitment to embodiment in her book, [The Bodily Nature of Consciousness: Sartre and Contemporary Philosophy of Mind](#) (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1997). Essentially, Wider argues that Sartre's conceptualization of self-consciousness maintains an artificial distinction between self and world that is, ultimately, belied in the account of presence which he draws and which has been empirically undone by work in neuroscience. As she notes below, being present to

the self at the primordial level of consciousness (the pre-reflective level or, in Sartre's terms, the unreflected level) does not mandate a maintained distinction between "self" and "world" in consciousness and, indeed, results in a blending of the two:

I am indeed, as Sartre would have it, in the presence of myself as well as of the world, and that presence does not necessarily require consciousness of the distinction between self and world. My consciousness of the world is a result of the blending of input from both self and world. Because of this the self is in a sense simply consciousness of the world. In pre-reflective consciousness the self is absent as a separate focus of attention because I do not call forth bodily responses to the external environment and focus on those alone. [. . .] Self-input and world input are separate because they are received and processed initially by separate neural orders. However, given the resultant blending (possibly by means of reentrant signaling), it is really nothing that separates them. The duality of self and world and hence the duality of consciousness of self and consciousness of the world are unified by being contents of one and the same object of consciousness. (147)

Ultimately, then, Wider's project is to recuperate Sartre's unacknowledged commitment to embodiment theory and to show how that commitment actually makes a positive case for taking Sartre's work on consciousness more seriously. As she writes,

Sartre believes—and I think by now most Western philosophers would agree—that it is the body that is the subject of human consciousness. Sartre, however, fails to take seriously enough his belief that intentionality and consciousness are embodied. He fails to follow, with sufficient detail, the implications of this belief, and many of the problems I raised in Chapters 3 and 4 are a result of this failure. If we take seriously, more seriously I think than Sartre himself does, the belief that it is the body that is the subject of consciousness, we can, at the very least, explain the pervasiveness and persistence of the belief that all consciousness is self-consciousness. I think we can also offer a firmer grounding for this belief than Sartre provides. (112)

5 I am using the first and, to my knowledge, the only English translation: [The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness](#), (Noonday Press: New York, 1957), trans. Forest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick. N.B. Henceforth, all references to Sartre will reference this book.

6 Wider actually argues the obverse of this statement: that is, she argues that embodiment is central to Sartre's account even though he fails to acknowledge its ramifications. She argues that if Sartre had owned up to his strong unacknowledged commitment to embodiment, his philosophy would appear less contradictory and more coherent. By bolstering Sartre's argument in this way, Wider hopes both to recuperate Sartre and to provide firmer philosophical footing for current embodiment theory as a whole (it would seem). My argument follows Wider in that I also believe

that Sartre is more invested in the embodiment debate than has previously been realized, but I also argue—contra Wider—that Sartre’s perceived resistance to a full-fledged account of embodiment shouldn’t be construed as an oversight on his part because it, importantly, explicates one of the central unacknowledged problems of embodiment theory: namely, that both a conception of the body as a material entity and the subjectivity appended back on to it through reflection actually become irrelevant and vacuous categories in the ontology that embodiment necessarily suggests.

7 I am adverting here to the widely known existentialist reversion of “existence” and “essence” whereby the subject, conceived in existentialist terms, creates an “essence” for itself in a post facto fashion after each moment of decision. Rather than a more traditional or more idealist account of subjectivity whereby one’s essence would specify one’s ensuing pattern of existence, existentialism conceives one’s essence to be something definitional only upon death and, hence, after all the instances of existence that have composed one’s life.

8 As another point of clarification: “subjectivity” is not Sartre’s word either. However, I think I am not unfairly using “subjectivity” as a bridge word to discuss both Damasio’s account of “extended consciousness” and Sartre’s account of “reflected consciousness.” My motivation in importing this extra layer of jargon is an attempt to keep the discussion linked to the larger discussion of the irreducibility of the mental in the philosophy of mind that the embodiment school tries so hard to keep in abeyance. My argument is that this terminological sleight-of-hand that I see embodiment theory enacting, ultimately, ensures that it elides the debate rather than solves or dismisses it (as such).

9 My understanding of Sartre’s ontology is indebted to Hazel Barnes’ essay, “Sartre’s Ontology,” in [The Cambridge Companion to Sartre](#) (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1998) ed. Christina Howells. Because a lengthy excursus on this matter would only be a weak parody of Barnes and would also be entirely beyond the scope of this essay, I would merely point readers to this cogent essay.

10 According to Barnes, Sartre conceives of consciousness in primarily human terms. Thus, I am side stepping a larger discussion which places his conception of consciousness within his larger ontological framework because, if we are to believe Barnes, these two aspects of consciousness are essentially coterminous. As a brief point of explication, I will try to give a rather reductive differentiation between Sartre’s *en soi* (being-in-itself) and his *pour soi* (being-for-itself): Sartre is fundamentally committed to interpolating consciousness (the *pour-soi* or the *being-for-itself*) as an irruption (or negation) in matter (the *en-soi* or the *being-in-itself*) within his larger ontological framework of Being. That is, Sartre conceives of one

form of Being in two modalities: the being-in-itself (roughly, brute matter) and the negation of being (consciousness) that occurs when the for-itself contemplates the in-itself (which it, itself, isn't). Consciousness opens up a disjunctive space by revealing being and, simultaneously, revealing itself as a crack (or irruption) in being. As Hazel Barnes cogently characterizes it,

Consciousness is the activity of revealing; that is, of reflecting, of intending. As an activity, consciousness is doubly dependent on being. First, it cannot exist except as there is something to be revealed (all consciousness is consciousness *of* something). And it is the activity of a being; that is, of a being-for-itself. This emphatically does not mean that these are two existences. Neither consciousness nor being-for-itself exists separately from the other. Being-for-itself is (self)conscious being. If in the Introduction to [Being and Nothingness](#) one occasionally feels that a disembodied mind is at work, this illusion is quickly dispelled. The for-itself carries a lack of being at its heart due to the presence of the nihilating (=nothing making) consciousness that is inseparable from it. A corpse is no longer a for-itself but an in-itself. (16; footnote omitted)

In other words, Sartre becomes committed to conceiving of all consciousness as fundamentally self-consciousness and, thus, to a version of consciousness that is fundamentally embodied.

11 For clarity's sake, I am only using and quoting from Sartre's account of consciousness as presented in [The Transcendence of the Ego](#) and not the entirety of his oeuvre. Sartre is notoriously self-contradictory, and I have purposely chosen the earliest and, to my mind, most coherent account of consciousness. Because my interest in Sartre is, primarily, as an illustrative juxtaposition to Damasio, I think the later revisions of his fundamental position are, in a certain sense, immaterial to my central claim in this paper. (*Cf. earlier footnote for bibliographic reference.*)

12 Of course, Sartre's primordial level is more at odds with Damasio's core level than this broadstroke comparison might otherwise indicate. Because Sartre is committed to a larger ontological view and to debunking the private immediacy inherent in the Husserlian phenomenological account of consciousness, he is committed to conceiving of consciousness as always conscious of itself as, specifically, the nihilation of its object. For Sartre, consciousness should always be construed as *consciousness of something* and, moreover, as inherently self-conscious of its differentiation from that something of which it is aware. Thus, in an almost proto-Derridean vein, Sartre's primordial, unreflected level consists of an originary concatenation of self-awareness as self-consciousness—something that doesn't enter into Damasio's schema until the second-order reflection that occurs in extended

consciousness. In essence, Sartre's model presents the origin of consciousness as a *mise en abyme* of representationality (to use another Derridean term).

13 Hazel Barnes quoting Sartre, cf. "Sartre's Ontology."