



# Moore on awareness, transparency, and *Erlebnis*

Valentina Martinis<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of G. E. Moore's ideas regarding inner and outer awareness, transparency, and the doctrine of *Erlebnis*, as articulated in a series of papers published in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* and *Mind* between 1901 and 1915. I defend two theses. First, I argue that, during this period, Moore gradually moved from an observational view of consciousness in general, including self-consciousness, to a mixed view in which subjects are directly aware of the objects of consciousness, while they “live through” (*erleben*) their mental acts. Notably, this shift shows that a certain debate between objectifying and non-objectifying consciousness in the Phenomenological school of Brentano and Husserl was to some extent replicated in the early British analytic tradition. Second, I contend that this change in Moore's thinking was motivated by an attempt to overcome the problem posed by the transparency of consciousness for the possibility of introspecting the act-object relation (an idea that he never abandoned). It is through this chief aim, I believe, that we can make sense of Moore's shifting ideas concerning awareness.

**Keywords** G. E. Moore · Transparency · Consciousness · Awareness · Self-awareness · Mental acts · Husserl · *Erlebnis*

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✉ Valentina Martinis  
vmartinis@uliege.be; valentinamartinis2@gmail.com; martinis\_valentina@phd.ceu.edu

<sup>1</sup> Philosophy Department, University of Liège, 7, Place du 20-Août (Bât. A1), Liège B-4000, Belgium

## 1 Introduction

This paper traces the evolution of George E. Moore's ideas regarding inner and outer awareness, transparency, and the doctrine of *Erlebnis*, as articulated in a series of papers published in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* and *Mind* between 1901 and 1916. I defend two theses.

First, I argue that, during this period, Moore gradually moved from an observational view of consciousness in general, including self-awareness,<sup>1</sup> to a mixed view in which subjects are directly aware of the objects of consciousness, while they “live through” (*erleben*) their mental acts. Notably, this shift reveals that a certain debate between objectifying and non-objectifying consciousness in the Phenomenological school of Brentano and Husserl was to some extent replicated in the early British analytic tradition - a parallel that suggests a largely overlooked line of convergence between these two traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Second, I contend that Moore's reconsideration was motivated by an attempt to solve the problem that the transparency intuition posed against the claim that the act-object distinction is available to introspection or, more in general, to first-person experience (an idea that he never abandoned; see Textor, 2021, p. 237). It is through this lens, I believe, that we can make sense of Moore's shifting ideas concerning awareness.

The paper is divided into two main parts. The first part, which covers the years from 1901 to 1909, will provide a picture of Moore's early view on inner and outer awareness and its connection with transparency. As noted earlier, Moore's early view is that one can directly observe worldly objects and mental acts alike. This observational view of inner and outer awareness raises two main issues. First, Moore relied on the alleged introspectable character of the act-object distinction to argue against British Idealism and in favour of a Brentanian dualist metaphysics. A crucial problem for this strategy was the question of why, if the act-object relation is indeed introspectable, many philosophers fail to see it. Moore's remarks on the transparency of consciousness respond to this pressing issue. A second issue concerned the observational view of inner awareness. This drew criticism from some of Moore's contemporaries, particularly George F. Stout and George Dawes Hicks, who objected

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I shall use ‘self-awareness’ and ‘inner awareness’ interchangeably for the general mental *genus* that denotes a subject's access to their own mental states. Following Spener (2024, p. 128), I take self-awareness to ramify into: (i) *inner attention* or *observation*, which is a mode of self-awareness that involves an attentional act of the subject towards an occurrent conscious mental event and whose output is a judgment; (ii) *inner apprehension*, which largely overlaps with what I here call *Erlebnis*; and (iii) *retrospection*, which I simply take to be inner attention to a past mental event.

<sup>2</sup> With the notable exceptions of Wolfgang Künne (1990) and some remarks by Mark Textor (2021, pp. 225–226). Interestingly, Künne writes that, to the best of his knowledge, Moore's 1910a and 1910b “contain the entire reaction of the first Cambridge generation of analytic philosophers to what turned out to be, for some decades, the most influential philosophical movement on the continent” (p. 105). As I will show in this paper, this is not true, as Moore discusses the doctrine of *Erlebnis* on at least two other occasions, namely in (Moore & Stout, 1913) and in (Moore et al., 1916); in addition, two other now-forgotten contemporaries of Moore, namely George Dawes Hicks and Samuel Alexander, actively engaged with the phenomenological tradition. For a more general overview of Brentano's and Husserl's influence on early analytic philosophy, see Van Der Schaar (2013) and Textor (2021).

that mental acts are not experienced or given to us as objects. Interestingly, their reasons closely followed Husserl's (2001) objections against Brentano's account of inner awareness.

By 1910, Moore conceded that mental states and their objects are given to the self in essentially different ways. This marks an important development in Moore's ideas, to which the second part of this paper is devoted. I suggest that Moore finally turned to the doctrine of *Erlebnis* in order to reaffirm the act-object distinction on a different basis. Acts are not only distinguished from their objects in virtue of their directedness, but also in virtue of their special relation with the self. I will conclude by assessing the success of this view against the transparency intuition.

## 2 Idealism and transparency (1901–1905)

It is well known that, after a juvenile fascination with British Idealism, Moore's initial philosophical activity was characterised by a series of systematic attacks against Kant's Idealism and the British Idealist tradition (Baldwin & Preti, 2011).<sup>3</sup> My aim in this section is not to evaluate the success of Moore's anti-idealist attack, on which more authoritative figures have already expressed their judgment (see, e.g., Baldwin, 1992), but rather to reconstruct and assess the philosophy of mind that Moore developed in the context and function of these attacks.

Four themes will emerge: (i) the thesis that consciousness-of is a "unique" sort of relation, involving an act's directedness to an intentional, mind-independent object; (ii) the thesis that introspection can provide ground for a dualist metaphysics; (iii) the unconditional defense, based on (ii), of the claim that the act-object distinction can be introspected; and finally, (iv) the related theme of transparency, namely the reason why the act-object distinction seems to escape the introspective gaze.

These themes, with the sole exception of (iv), can be found as early as 1901, in Moore's review of McTaggart's *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology*, published in the same year. It is thus to this paper that I will turn first, which I will use to introduce and problematize Moore's early view on consciousness-of. Two main questions will emerge from this discussion, which will find an answer in Moore's 1903 'The Refutation of Idealism'. Finally, 1905 'The Nature and Reality of Objects of Perception' and 1910 'The Subject-Matter of Psychology' will help me elucidate some of the concepts that are key to Moore's view of this period, especially with regard to the structure of inner and outer awareness.

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<sup>3</sup>The latter strand of Idealism, most notably represented by F. H. Bradley and A.E. Taylor, can be briefly and effectively summarised through Taylor's motto that all reality is mental or spiritual (Moore, 1903b, p. 435). For the purposes of this paper, we need not distinguish British Idealism from German Idealism; let it suffice to say that, like its German cousin, British Idealism was characterised by a unitary view of the world as an organic, spiritual or mental whole in which differences exist harmoniously. This unity extends to the system of knowledge, according to which all ideas are systematically linked together into one whole with no fundamental divisions between the different subject matters. For an overview of British Idealism and its peculiarities, see Mander (2011).

## 2.1 Uniqueness of consciousness

McTaggart's *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology*, published in 1901, was an attempt at explaining the complicated and obscure relation between the spiritual whole and its finite parts. His particular flavour of Idealism reserved a front-stage place for the notion of consciousness-of, as he proposed that the relation between the universe and its parts is that of the type exemplified by the relation that holds between two conscious selves, each of which is conscious of the other as well as their systemic unity (McTaggart, 1901, p. 14).

Three things should be remarked on in Moore's review. The first is the emergence, already in 1901, of Moore's anti-idealist strategy, according to which the relation of consciousness-of is not one of whole to organic parts, but "unique" (Moore, 1901, p. 187). At this point, Moore is still a bit vague as to the details of his thesis, but the core intuition is already present: consciousness-of is a relation that yields awareness of an object that is not itself contained in this act of consciousness (in the sense of being 'in' the mind). We will get a better grasp of this idea when discussing his 'Refutation' later in this section. The second is Moore's diagnosis of McTaggart's mistake, again anticipating one important theme of 1903b. The Idealist's thesis that of which I am conscious is always both a part and not a part of my mind is, in Moore's view, rooted in the failure to distinguish between "that of which I am conscious and my consciousness of it" – namely, between *the object* and *the act* of consciousness. This is even though the act-object distinction, Moore writes, is obvious to "direct in(tro) spection".<sup>4</sup> The third notable point is the prominent foundational role assigned to introspection in establishing a dualist metaphysics. This is a point Moore shared with Russell, who claimed that the following argument convinced him of the falsehood of Idealism:<sup>5</sup>

Consider the act of seeing a patch of colour. If we paid attention to the seeing, we would notice that it is directed onto something, i.e., the patch of colour; the latter, by contrast, would not seem so directed. Thus, introspection reveals that some facts have directedness, and some do not. Brentano's thesis of the 'mark of the mental' tells us that all and only psychological facts are intentionally directed at objects. Thus, introspection reveals that there are two kinds of facts: psychological and physical; not all reality is mental. (Russell, 1921, pp. 142–143; see also Textor, 2021, pp. 217–233).

<sup>4</sup>The role that Moore assigns to 'inspection' in 1901 is the role he assigns to 'introspection' in 1903; because of this seamless passage, I here use 'inspection' and 'introspection' interchangeably. Here is the full quote: "It is commonly supposed, as it was by Berkeley, to be obvious to direct inspection that what I know is always in my mind; whereas the only thing which really is thus obvious, is that my consciousness of the thing is so. The history of philosophy exhibits a uniform inability to distinguish between that of which I am conscious and my consciousness of it - an inability which has found a monument in the word "idea" which regularly stands for both" (1903b, p. 187).

<sup>5</sup>Russell gave up on the introspectability of the act-object distinction in 1919 on the ground that the distinction was not, in fact, "empirically discoverable" (Russell, 1919, p. 25)

It would certainly be a strong argument for a dualist metaphysics *if* the directedness of psychical facts were directly introspectable.<sup>6</sup> Yet, it is unclear that the introspective data reveal this directedness, as the contrast between Idealists and New Realists such as Moore and Russell shows. This issue will accompany us throughout the paper.

This initial discussion raises the following questions: (1) What is the meaning of Moore's claim that consciousness-of is "unique"? (2) And how is it that the Idealist fails to see the act-object distinction, which Moore has claimed to be "obvious to direct inspection"? Moore's famous 'The Refutation of Idealism' contains the answers to these questions. Let us proceed in order.

In 1903, Moore claims that the correct analysis of a sensation of blue includes "beside blue, both a unique element 'awareness' and a unique relation of this element to blue" (Moore, 1903b, p. 450). By 'consciousness' or 'awareness', Moore refers to that which, e.g., a sensation of red and a sensation of green have in common; and by 'object' that for which they differ (p. 445). Their relation is called by Moore "unique" multiple times; but what is this relation, and why is it unique? In the context of the paper's anti-idealist dialectic, this question is fundamental: Moore has to make some innovations to convince his readers that his view is a viable alternative to idealism, in that it does not fall into the same mistake of making blue an organic part of the sensation of blue.

Moore's starting point is that the relation between a sensation and its object is similar if not identical to knowledge:

A sensation is, in reality, a case of 'knowing' or 'being aware of' or 'experiencing' something. When we know that the sensation of blue exists, the fact we know is that there exists an awareness of blue. And this awareness is not merely, as we have hitherto seen it must be, itself something distinct and unique, utterly different from blue: it also has a perfectly distinct and unique relation to blue [...]. This relation is just that which we mean in every case by 'knowing'. To have in your mind 'knowledge' of blue, is *not* to have in your mind a 'thing' or 'image' of which blue is the content. To be aware of the sensation of blue is *not* to be aware of a mental image [...]. It is to be aware of an awareness of blue; awareness being used, in both cases, in exactly the same sense. (p. 449; orig. emph.)

That awareness is a kind of knowing means at least two things. First, it means that awareness is distinct from blue; this is established via introspection by arguments of the sort put forward by Russell. Second, while it is true that, whenever there is a sensation of blue, there is blue, this does not imply that the two are inseparable aspects of the experience (p. 446); it only implies that, whenever there is a sensation, this sensation is *of* the blue. The unique relation between awareness and blue is the relation of

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<sup>6</sup>I would like to note, in passing, that it should be obvious that Moore could never have advocated for the so-called strong transparency of experience thesis, as correctly individuated by (Kind, 2003). This is because to give in to transparency would have meant to give in to monism (either idealism or neutral monism), as remarked by William James (1904).

“awareness of anything” (p. 452), and blue is thus ‘part’ of a sensation of blue only in the special sense of being the intentional object of the awareness.

Awareness-of is a kind of knowing in that it bridges between our sensations and the external world. This allows Moore to establish, against the idealist, that “There is, therefore, no question of how we are to “get outside the circle of our own ideas and sensations. Merely to have a sensation is already to be outside that circle” (p. 451). Notice that Moore’s sense-data are mind-independent entities (see below). For this reason, to be aware of something is to go beyond one’s mind – to meet the world itself.

Finally, awareness-of is unique in another sense:

If [...] we clearly recognise the nature of that peculiar relation which I have called ‘awareness of anything’; if we see that *this* is involved equally in the analysis of *every* experience - from the merest sensation to the most developed perception or reflexion, and that *this* is in fact the only essential element in an experience - the only thing that is both common and peculiar to all experiences - the only thing which gives us reason to call any fact mental [...]. (pp. 452–3)

Every experience, Moore writes, whether it be a sensation or a thought, is characterised by a dyadic structure in which the awareness element relates to the object element in a unique way. Mental facts are all and only those that have among their constituents the dyadic relation that we can generally call “awareness of anything” and which holds between awareness and its object(s).

To summarise what has been said in this section, awareness-of is a unique relation, because (a) it is always different from its object, to which it is intentionally directed, (b) it is a factive state that puts us in contact with the fact of the existence of a worldly object,<sup>7</sup> and (c) it is the mark of the mental.

## 2.2 Moore’s transparency

After having clarified the components of a state of awareness and the unique character of their relation, we can move to question (2) above. How is it that the Idealist fails to see the act-object distinction that is supposed to be “obvious to direct inspection”? The answer to this question leads us to the vexed issue of the transparency of experience. Some remarks by Maja Spener (2017) will help us better frame this last issue.

Spener, quoting Firth (1949), observes that 20th-century sense-data theorists were generally unresponsive to introspection-based criticisms from their opponents. They would pursue two main strategies to relieve the tension surrounding the philosophical contrast on introspecting data (Spener, 2017, p. 153). The first strategy was to resolve the disagreement by diagnosing a problem on the part of their opponents; this, Spener remarks, was the sense of Moore’s appeal to the transparency or diaphanousness

<sup>7</sup> Despite his talk of sensations of simple objects such as blue, Moore was a firm believer that propositions are the only objects of experience and knowledge, as he repeated at multiple points; see e.g. (Laird et al., 1920, p. 138; Moore, 1902, pp. 88–89, 1910b, pp. 407–408). On this topic, see also Textor (2024). Thus, what we know when we are in a state of awareness is *that* something (such as a sense datum or a mental act) exists.

of consciousness. The second strategy appealed to different types of introspective access to the data of one's experience – typically, a casual, ordinary, naïve way, and a more careful, theoretically informed way. Unsurprisingly, only the second type of introspective access provides the correct interpretation. Price's defense against the direct realist offers an example of this dual strategy (Spener, 2017, p. 154). Price accepts that there is a casual, naïve way of describing the phenomenal character of perceptual experience as of presenting ordinary properties and objects; yet, on a more careful inspection, perceptual consciousness is correctly revealed as consisting of a state of acquaintance with a sense-datum and an act of acceptance that there is a worldly object to which the sense-datum belongs.

I agree with Spener that Moore appeals to some undiagnosed problem on the side of the Idealist to explain their incapacity to introspect the act-object distinction. As seen, this idea is already at work in his 1901, and it is further developed through the appeal to the transparent nature of consciousness. However, and this is often neglected in the literature on transparency, Moore *also* suggests a way of directing introspection that might lead one to the right characterisation of one's experience, much in Price's fashion. Let's see how.

Moore starts his presentation of transparency in 1903 by repeating that the Idealist's belief that *esse* is *percipi* rests on some introspective mistake: "The idealist maintains that object and subject are necessarily connected, mainly because he *fails to see* that they are distinct, that they are two, at all" (Moore, 1903b, p. 442; my emph.). But why is it so? This has to do with the nature of the conscious element, which is, as it were, *transparent*:

[...] when we refer to introspection and try to discover what the sensation of blue is, it is very easy to suppose that we have before us only a single term. The term 'blue' is easy enough to distinguish, but the other element which I have called 'consciousness'-that which sensation of blue has in common with sensation of green-is extremely difficult to fix. [...] And, in general, that which makes the sensation of blue a mental fact seems to escape us; it seems, if I may use a metaphor, to be transparent - we look through it and see nothing but the blue; we may be convinced that there is something, but what it is no philosopher, I think, has yet clearly recognised. (p. 446)

The Idealist's mistake is explained by the fact that consciousness is transparent or diaphanous, in the sense that, when introspecting our mental states, it looks to one as though there is nothing to introspect but the object(s) of the state. The diaphanous or transparent character of consciousness is thus an obstacle to a correct analysis of sensations (and mental states in general, as we are going to see) into act and object. So far, nothing new. A few pages later, however, Moore maintains that this obstacle can be removed, and thus that one *can* find the act-object distinction, if some conditions are satisfied:

[...] though philosophers have recognised that something distinct is meant by consciousness, they have never yet had a clear conception of what that something is. They have not been able to hold it and blue before their minds and to

compare them, in the same way in which they can compare blue and green. And this for the reason I gave above: namely that the moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see what, distinctly, it is, it seems to vanish: it seems as if we had before us a mere emptiness. When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element is as if it were diaphanous. *Yet it can be distinguished if we look attentively enough, and if we know that there is something to look for.* (p. 450; my emph.)

At the end of this paragraph, Moore hints at the possibility that if introspection is (a) attentive enough and (b) correctly directed by our belief (“we know that there is something to look for”), it can reveal the existence of the act-object distinction. But how is it, if, at the same time, “when we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue”? This seems contradictory.

One way to resolve this tension is indeed by appealing to the second strategy identified by Spener: only undirected and uninformed introspection suggests the unity of act and object; when we know *how* to look (i.e., “attentively enough”) and *what* to look for, the act/object distinction is revealed. In this regard, when discussing the introspective error of the Idealist, Moore says something quite precise: that they have not been able to hold the conscious element vis-à-vis blue before their minds, so as to compare the two. How should one do that? Moore does not say, and it might be the case that, at this point, he did not yet have a method to offer. However, some years later, in ‘The Subject-Matter of Psychology’ (1910a), he argues that if the conscious character is that which remains constant when the object varies or across different instances of the same type of act, we could only observe this unchanging character *over time*:

There is nothing more certain to me than that I do constantly see one colour at one time, and a different colour at a different time, and that, though the colours are different, I am conscious of them both in exactly the same sense. It follows, then, that since the colours are different in the two cases, whereas what I mean by my consciousness of them is in both cases the same, my consciousness of a colour must be something different from any of the colours of which I am conscious. (Moore, 1910a, p. 39)

This analysis can be generalised, Moore writes, to all mental acts, as I can at different times, e.g., remember different events or will different actions. Taking a diachronic perspective will thus allow us to hold consciousness and its objects “before [our] minds and to compare them” (see also Textor, 2021, pp. 237–238).

This is the same solution offered by Husserl to Natorp’s transparency challenge,<sup>8</sup> when he argued that it is only by taking a diachronic perspective on object presentation that one can distinguish between acts, contents, and objects. This case is exemplified by the analysis of perceptual constancies (2001, pp. 104–5; see also Sect. 3 in this paper). However, there is an important difference between Husserl’s and Moore’s methods. According to Husserl, while we are aware of external objects through our

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

acts that intend them, we are not aware of acts in the same way. Acts, that is, are not *objects* of awareness. I will return to this in the next section. In this section, I want to highlight the fact that Moore, by contrast, initially thought of the awareness of mental acts (awareness of awareness) on the same model as awareness of worldly objects:

I am as directly aware of the existence of material things in space as of my own sensations; and *what* I am aware of with regard to each is exactly the same—namely that in one case the material thing, and in the other case my sensation does really exist. (1903b, p. 453; orig. emph.)

In (1905), he writes that we directly *observe* things like shapes, colours, sizes, and spatial relations “by the senses”, and, beside them, “there is also another kind which we can be said to observe”, namely our own perceptions:

Not only can I observe a red and a blue book side by side; I can also observe myself observing them. I can perceive a red patch moving towards a white, and I can also perceive my perception of this movement. (1905, pp. 102–3)

And then again:

I certainly never have been conscious of anybody else’s thoughts or feelings or perceptions in that direct manner in which I am conscious of a colour when I actually see it; but of my own mental acts I am very often conscious in this direct manner. (1910a, p. 43)

This observational model is compatible with the interpretation of awareness of awareness as a sort of Lockean inner sense, in which the awareness of the awareness of an object O is a higher-order awareness state (viz., an observational, quasi-perceptual state) that is directed at the lower-level state of awareness of blue, and the two states are distinct.<sup>9</sup>

### 3 Moore’s change of heart and the doctrine of *Erlebnis* (1910–1916)

We have seen that in 1903b, (1905) and (1910a), Moore maintains that we have *direct observational awareness* of our mental acts in the same sense in which we are *directly aware of* or *observe* external objects. He also seemingly proposes a solution to his very own transparency problem that appeals to the diachronic character of introspection. But after 1910, something happens: he abandons the parallel between awareness of material objects and awareness of psychological states. He now claims that we are aware of mental acts and their objects in different ways; more precisely, subjects are aware of acts in a non-observational way, simply by experiencing or ‘living through’ (*erleben*) them. Why? In this section, I will reconstruct this shift and advance my interpretation of the motives behind it.

<sup>9</sup> Versions of this view are held, for instance, by Armstrong (1970) (Lycan, 1987), and Rosenthal (2005).

In support of this interpretation, it will be helpful to set Moore's change of heart in the context of what Omar Nasim called 'The Controversy' – a two-decade-long debate about the problem of knowledge of the external world, the subject-matter of psychology and philosophy, the status of sense-data, and other related issues (2014). The controversy was for many, including Moore, "an opportunity to develop and refine their own positions" (Nasim, 2014, p. 14), among which, as I am arguing, his view on self-awareness. One of the places where the controversy developed were the meetings of the Aristotelian Society; it is thanks to this membership, Moore later wrote, that the existence of "the greater part" of his published work is due (Moore, 1942, p. 24).

One of the central points of dispute within The Controversy concerned the proper analysis of mental acts (specifically, whether they exhibit a dual or a tripartite structure) and the question of which entities are mental (particularly, presentations and sense data). I suggest that Moore's change of heart around 1910 can be historically illuminated by his engagement with some objections raised by George F. Stout and George Dawes Hicks, and with the ideas of the Phenomenological School that they propounded. It was through this exchange as part of The Controversy, I suggest, that Moore came to reconsider the commitments of his earlier view.

As recorded in the minutes of the 30<sup>th</sup> and the 31<sup>st</sup> meeting of the AS (1908, 1909), Stout presented the paper 'Are Presentations Mental or Physical?' on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1909, in the presence of Hicks. In this paper, Stout argued that "the existential presence of presentations to or in the mind does not essentially consist in their being objects to a subject" (1909, p. 243). Moore discussed his paper 'The Subject-Matter of Psychology' on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1909 in a session chaired by Hicks; as we have already seen, this paper still contains a commitment to the observational view of self-awareness. Hicks then read his (rather harsh) critique of this paper on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 1910, in the presence of Moore. The first place in which Moore expresses his approval for a non-observational type of self-awareness is in his review of August Messer's *Empfindung und Denken*. This was published in *Mind* in 1910, though I ignore the exact month. This timeline strongly suggests that Stout's and Hicks's comments might have influenced Moore's view on the matter, explaining his change of heart and his remarks on *Erlebnis* discussed in this section.<sup>10</sup> Before turning to the remarks of Hicks and Stout, I will first introduce the doctrine of *Erlebnis*, in order to clarify the theoretical background against which their positions are best understood.

The concept of *Erlebnis* was originally developed by W. Dilthey (cf. Davey, 2015), but the context that is most relevant to our discussion is Husserl's criticism of

<sup>10</sup> Another piece of the puzzle can be located in a passage from Moore's autobiography, where he reports that his decision to teach Psychology at Cambridge in 1911 (one year after the events here reconstructed) was motivated by the fact that he was already quite familiar with the books recommended for the subject. These were Ward's article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Stout's *Manual and Analytic Psychology*, and James' *Principles of Psychology*, which discussed "subjects on which I had thought a great deal and thought as hard as I could" (Moore, 1942, p. 29). It is well-known that Stout and Ward were well acquainted with the works of Hermann Lotze, Brentano, and Kasimir Twardowski. This suggests two further potential sources of influence on Moore's philosophy of mind: the American and the German psychological traditions (the latter primarily or perhaps exclusively through the mediation of Ward and Stout). These sources merit further investigation, but I cannot hope to do so in this paper. For the influence of German empirical psychology on Moore, see the work of Consuelo Preti, for instance her (Preti, 2008).

Brentano's self-awareness. It is well known that, according to Brentano, whenever I am in a mental act, I am aware of two objects, namely the intentional object(s) of the act and the act itself. This is in virtue of the so-called dual nature of the Brentanian act, as primarily directed to its object(s) and, secondarily and self-reflexively, to itself (Brentano, 1995, pp. 127–128). The problem with the view is that it implies that self-awareness derives from self-objectification, namely, the act's taking itself as an object.

Against the latter allegedly objectifying feature of the theory,<sup>11</sup> Husserl argued that we should disambiguate between two senses of "appearance", one used to denote the perceptual experience of the object and the other the object which appears. This distinction is obvious when one considers that the object in its entirety is never given to us at once; at any time, I can only distinguish parts of the object, i.e., 'adumbrations'. Notice that, for Husserl, the appearing of an object is not the result of the mere appearing of some non-intentional sensation (in the sense of the Husserlian *hyle*). Sensations must be "interpreted" by an "objectifying interpretation", thanks to which a static object emerges from the ever-changing multitude of sense presentations (Husserl, 2001, p. 84). Neither this objectifying process, called the perceptual *act*, nor the non-intentional sense presentations are themselves *perceived*:

*Sensations*, and the acts 'interpreting' them or apperceiving them, are alike experienced [*erlebt*], but they do not appear as objects: they are not seen, heard or *perceived* by any sense. *Objects*, on the other hand, appear and are perceived, but they are not *experienced* [*erlebt*] (Husserl, 2001, p. 105; orig. emph.; see also p. 83).

Neither acts nor sensations are experienced *as objects*. The object is the world, and it is given to us as such *through* experiencing acts and their contents (p. 106). This is both a phenomenological and a logical point: we can easily imagine that if acts and sensations were also to appear to us, there would be a regress of appearances.

I will call the doctrine of *Erlebnis* the thesis that one is not aware of one's mental acts in the way one is aware of physical objects, but by experiencing or 'living through' them in the sense outlined above. The latter English expression occasionally translates the German verb *erleben* (see e.g., Hicks et al., 1927, p. 67) and denotes a kind of awareness that is non-objectifying, where 'objectifying' means making something available to consciousness as an object.<sup>12</sup>

While *Erlebnis* has survived and thrived in the continental tradition through Husserl's defining influence (for instance in the classical works of Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Sartre, 2003), the debate between objectifying and non-objectifying self-awareness has come to the attention of the analytic tradition only in the last twenty years or so (see for instance Zahavi (1999, 2005)). It might thus be surprising to learn that this

<sup>11</sup>Against this reading, see Antonelli (2022).

<sup>12</sup>The following might generate some confusion. Husserl distinguishes between objectifying and non-objectifying mental acts. Typical objectifying acts are perceptions, imaginings, and judgments, of which perceptions and judgments are positional; typical non-objectifying acts are desires, hopes and wishes (Staiti, 2025). However, *all* mental acts, whether objectifying or non-objectifying, are lived through, i.e., experienced in a non-objectifying manner.

debate was present in numerous meetings of the Aristotelian Society at the beginning of the last century, participated by illustrious names such as, among others, C. D. Broad, Hicks, Stout, and, of course, Moore himself (Hicks et al., 1927, 1928; Laird et al., 1920; Moore et al., 1916).

In fact, this ceases to be surprising, once we consider that the theses of the Brentano school were common currency in the British philosophical discourse of that time. This was chiefly due to Ward's and Stout's influence, both through their philosophical activity and their teaching activity in Cambridge. Particularly, as it is now well-known, Stout's *Analytic Psychology* is infused with Brentanian ideas (see Van Der Schaar, 2013), and in his role of editor of *Mind* (1892-1920), he commissioned several reviews of works belonging to the Austro-German tradition; two notable examples are Russell's review of Meinong (1904) and Moore's review of Brentano's work on ethics (1903a).<sup>13</sup>

It is against this philosophical *milieu* that Stout's and Hick's criticisms of observational self-awareness should be understood. Hicks's discussion of (Moore's, 1910a) is a wide-ranging critique of Moore's philosophy of mind and perception. For sake of brevity, I shall here consider only a few points that seem to me particularly convincing. Hicks denied that *the same* direct relation could hold between (a) our seeing and the colour we see and (b) our consciousness of the seeing and the seeing; for in (a), if we follow Moore, the colour and our awareness appear to be essentially distinct, whereas in (b), there does not seem to be any distinction between our awareness and that of which we are aware (Hicks, 1909, p. 273). The same objection was also raised by Stout, who noticed that the sensation and the awareness of the sensation are not numerically distinct things, but one and the same; the difference between being aware of the sensation and being aware of the object of the sensation is analogous to that of jumping a jump and jumping a ditch (1909, p. 273). Here is a particularly striking quote that further illustrates Hick's view on *Erlebnis*:

Although we may express in words a view of the mental life as consisting of a series of events presented to a special faculty of perception, we cannot reconcile such an interpretation with what we are at the same time taking to be the real character of mental facts themselves. If we are serious in regarding mental states as mental, as being facts *of* mind, then their very nature precludes the possibility of their being presented to the mind as *objects*. Just that which is specifically characteristic of them – that they are ways in which the mind knows or is aware of objects – must need [to] evade presentation in objective fashion. (Hicks in Hicks et al., 1927, p. 66)

The point is that, conceptually and phenomenologically, it is a mistake to think of self-awareness as involving the objectification of one mental state of another, or of one state and itself. Mental acts are not the kind of things that can be the object of

<sup>13</sup> It is also worth noting is also Russell's planned, but never realised, review of Husserl's *Logical Investigations* for *Mind*. The story of this review and the potential influence it might have had on analytic philosophy is reconstructed in Vrahimis (2013). Russell would later list as the principal early twentieth-century figures who fought against German Idealism, apart from Moore and himself, Frege, Husserl and Meinong (Russell, 1924, p. 69).

another act (whether this other act is numerically distinct or identical), because they are *ways in which the mind knows or is aware of objects* (in Laird et al., 1920, pp. 159–160). Treating mental states as *objects* of awareness is a categorical mistake.<sup>14</sup>

So far for *Erlebnis* in general. Let us now return to Moore, his understanding of *Erlebnis*, and the role it played in his philosophy of mind. As already mentioned, the paper that contains the first and most detailed discussion of *Erlebnis* is Moore's review of Messer (1910b); further elaborations on *Erlebnis* are also contained in two later symposia (Moore & Stout, 1913; Moore et al., 1916), which I will briefly mention.

### 3.1 *Erlebnis* as a remedy to transparency

In (1910b), Moore reviews a book by German philosopher August Messer<sup>15</sup> titled *Empfindung und Denken* (1908). In the author's intent, the book is an introductory text to the scope and method of the recently born psychological science, and it is largely influenced by Husserl's *Philosophical Investigations* (so much so that it can be considered a compendium to Husserl's fifth investigation; see (Künne, 1990, p. 105)).

Moore was quite impressed with Messer's book, which appeared to him "extraordinarily good" (1910b, p. 395). Moore describes the book's main aim as an attempt at outlining a complete taxonomy of mental phenomena, and a study of all their possible constituents and respective differences. Messer's most important distinction of mental phenomena is between perception (*Wahrnehmung*), of which sensations (*Empfindungen*) are one of the main components, and thought (*Denken*). Messer also individuates two kinds of constituents of mental phenomena (*Bestandtheil eines Erlebnisses*): sensations (*Empfindungen*) and acts (*Akte*) and the complexes they compose (1908, p. 45). Sensations are the simplest analysable contents of consciousness, such as grey, green, sweet, sour, etc. (p. 3, pp. 9–10), whereas acts are consciousness elements that are directed towards something (pp. 42–3).

After introducing this taxonomy, Moore asks what it is to be an experience or *Erlebnis*. He complains that Messer does not say much on this topic, except that "Nothing, in [Messer's] use of terms, can be an *Erlebnis* of mine, or a constituent of one, except what is '*erlebt*' by me" (Moore, 1910b, p. 395); but what does it mean that something is *erlebt* by me? Moore advances the following answer:

Whenever [Messer] says that anything is '*erlebt*' by me, what he means is that it has to me that relation which my consciousness of an object always has to me whenever I am conscious of the object in question, and which is expressed by saying that the consciousness is 'mine'. (pp. 395–6)

<sup>14</sup>This does not mean that one cannot introspect one's act via another act that is itself lived through (Hicks in Hicks et al., p. 69). *Erlebnis* is only *one*, basic, form of awareness.

<sup>15</sup>August Messer (1867–1937) was professor *ordinarius* of philosophy, psychology and pedagogy at the University of Gießen. In his youth, he was trained in experimental psychology in Külpe's laboratory in Würzburg. He later combined Külpe's teachings with an interest in Kant's transcendental philosophy and Husserl's phenomenology. For a brief introduction on Messer and his relationship with Husserl, see (Clarke & Staiti, 2018). See also (Künne, 1990).

Moore proposes to understand the idea of *Erlebnis* as the relation of *ownership* between the ego and its acts. Though this idea is partly phenomenological, as we are going to see, we should not take Moore to imply that conscious mental states display what is sometimes called ‘mineness’ or ‘for-me-ness’, namely the fact that experiences *seem* to be mine (Flanagan, 1992; Zahavi, 2005; Zahavi & Kriegel, 2016). Moore’s mineness is an ontological relation of mind-dependence. This appears obvious later in the text, when Moore wonders whether sensations (which he takes to be analogous to his sense-data) and acts, in Messer’s sense, are equally *erlebt*. Moore takes Messer to answer his question positively, while Moore disagrees. He writes that: “So far as I can see, no sense-data ever have to me or to my Acts precisely those relations which all my Acts have to me and to one another” (p. 398) – this relation being that of *Erlebnis*.<sup>16</sup>

Moore’s interpretation of Messer (who follows Husserl in this) is correct to the extent that Messer did distinguish between perceiving and sensing, and claimed that, e.g., the forest is perceived, but not felt, whereas the green of the forest is felt, but not perceived (Messer, 1908, p. 10). However, Moore’s sense-data are not the same entities as Messer’s *Empfindungen*: these are mind-dependent, private, psychical entities (Messer, 1908, pp. 36–7), while Moore’s sense-data are public and mind-independent (see, e.g., Moore & Stout, 1913). Moore is aware of this difference, which he however deems irrelevant: even if sensations were mind-dependent (as imagistic elements in consciousness for instance are), it would not follow that they must have to the ego the same relation that acts have (*ivi*). In other words, even though for Moore all *Erlebnisse* are mind-dependent, there might be mind-dependent entities that are not *erlebt*; how could this be?

Moore answers this question in another paper. In 1913, he maintains that a sense-datum “is *in our mind* or is *ours*” only in the sense of being the object of our direct apprehension; by contrast, a mental act is in our mind or is “*erlebt*” in a different sense, “for nothing is more certain than an act of direct apprehension or belief may be in my mind, without being itself directly apprehended by me” (Moore & Stout, 1913, p. 363) – that is, without being the object of another act of apprehension. In other

<sup>16</sup>To discuss the relation between Moore’s understanding of *Erlebnis* and his evolving views on sense-data would probably require a separate paper; but, as one anonymous reviewer pointed out, it is a context that is hard to ignore. In the limited scope of this paper, let me therefore say a few things. Clearly, Moore’s denial that Messer’s presentations can be *erlebt* rests on his long-standing opposition to assimilating the content of a sensation to its object, an argument traceable at least to his 1903b. It is in the 1916 symposium to which I refer below that the two subjects of *Erlebnis* and sense-data explicitly converge, particularly in Hicks’s account of the disagreement between Stout and Moore. Hicks recalls Stout’s distinction between *sensible qualities* that objects inherently have possess (i.e., the property of being green of the meadow the greenness of a meadow) and *sensations* (i.e., the green that is actually sensed the green that is actually sensed; see Stout, 1909). The point of contention between Moore and Stout concerns whether sensations are *erlebt* or not. Hicks rightly interprets Stout as holding that sensations “are ‘immediately experienced’ or ‘lived through’ (*erlebt*), in a way similar to that in which acts of attention or judging are, and thus are not merely BEFORE the mind but IN it” (p. 436). And he further takes this to entail that, according to Stout, “no distinction is to be drawn between the “sensations” and the experiencing of them” (p. 436–7). Hicks follows Moore in complaining that Stout’s view does not properly distinguish between the act of sensing something (which is *erlebt*) and the something that is sensed, but he departs from Moore on the ontological status of *sensa* “as independent existents from sensible qualities” (p. 437). It seems however unfair to claim that, despite a somewhat confusing language, Stout did not differentiate act, content, and object, as he had worked out this distinction as early as 1892 (Stout, 1892; see also Van Der Schaar, 2013, p. 60ff.).

words, while acts are mind-dependent *and erlebt*, sense-data are only apprehended as objects of one's acts, whether they be mind-independent or not.

Moore is even more explicit on the relation between the self and its acts in a following symposium (Moore et al., 1916). There, he remarks that there is a sense in which the assertion that my acts of attention or judgment are "'lived through' by me [...] follows from the fact that they are acts of judgment or attention of mine" (p. 423), namely that they have to me a peculiar relation:

It seems to me that this relation expressed by "lived through" by me is such that to say of anything that at one time it *was* being lived through by me, and that at another it was *not*, implies that at the second time the thing in question did not exist at all. It is, in other words, a relation such that anything which has it to me *can* only exist so long as it has it to me: such that, from the assertion that a given thing has ceased to have it to me, it *follows* that the thing in question has ceased to exist. (p. 424; orig. emph.)

This kind of mind-dependence relation, Moore urges, does not hold in the case of sense-data. Sense-data are presented, not lived through, and the relation of presentation does not imply that which is presented is mind-dependent.

How does one know this? Moore gives two reasons (though not two arguments). The first is simply that it is "plain", "obvious" (p. 424) and "almost universally assumed" (p. 425) that what is meant by living through an act is that the act ceases to exist when I cease to 'act' so. The second is phenomenological. I know "by observation" when a given sense-data (a) has ceased to be presented to me *and* has ceased to exist and (b) has ceased to be presented to me but not to exist. When watching some fireworks, for example, "I can actually see a given localised visual sensation – the sensation of a spark from a bomb, for instance – come into existence and then cease to exist"; and this differs from the case in which the sense-data of a spark ceases to be presented to me as the result of my turning my head away. The difference between (a) and (b) brings out the difference between the relation of presentation and the relation of being "lived through":

When I observe that a given mental act or state of mine, an act of judgment or an emotion, has ceased to be lived through by me, I am, I think, always at the same time observing that the act or state in question has ceased to exist; that it has ceased to exist is, I think, a part of what I observe in observing that it has ceased to be lived through by me. But in the case of presentation, while there are cases in which I do observe *both* that a given sensation has ceased to be presented to me *and* that it has ceased to exist, there seem to be others which differ from these just in respect of the fact that, though I do observe that a given sensation has ceased to be presented to me, I do *not* also observe that it has ceased to exist. (p. 429; orig. emph.)

To sum up, acts are lived through, while sense-data are merely presented. This means that the sensibles of my apprehension are presented to me as continuing or ceasing to exist independently of my perceiving them. The same is not true for acts: acts can

only exist as long as I have them. When I look away from the fireworks, my seeing (of the fireworks) ceases to exist, while the fireworks keep existing; when I stop being in anger, the anger ceases to exist, while the object of my anger (if any) continues to exist; and so on.

I shall now place these remarks in the larger context of Moore's philosophical evolution. The first thing to notice is that they explicitly contradict what Moore had stated a few years earlier, when he was holding, as we have seen, that one observes material things and our experiences of them "*in precisely the same way*". The Moore of 1910 and following years conceives of the nature of self-awareness in quite a novel manner: acts, but not objects, are lived through.

I believe that this shift has three merits. First, it shields Moore from objections of the type of Stout's and Hicks's against objectifying self-consciousness, as described at the beginning of this section. Second, the doctrine of *Erlebnis* offers another way of drawing the act-object distinction, alternative and compatible to the distinction drawn in terms of intentionality. Before 1910, the introspectability of the act-object distinction was based solely on the idea that one can directly observe the act's directness to something, as opposed to the object's idleness, so to speak. Transparency challenged this thesis: when one tries to introspect one's acts, one finds only the object(s) of the act. But the doctrine of *Erlebnis* states that acts cannot be directly observed because they are not *objects* of our awareness; yet, one can be directly aware of them by being in them – by living through them. The third and final merit of the adoption of *Erlebnis* is thus that it offers an answer to the challenge raised by transparency. I will now discuss this point in more detail.

It is useful to start by recalling that Husserl's move against the transparency intuition (as voiced by Natorp) resorts precisely to *Erlebnis*. In the fifth investigation, Husserl tackles the question of whether acts can be found in experience. Part of his answer against Natorp relies on *Erlebnis*: acts cannot be found in introspection in the sense in which we find the objects of our experience, as we have seen in the quote above.<sup>17</sup> It might be that Moore intended to use the doctrine of *Erlebnis* to the same end of defending the existence of mental acts, as well as their availability to inner awareness.

<sup>17</sup>The complete answer invokes the difference between contents and objects of experience and acts as those which "ensoul" contents with their intentionality. It is in virtue of the objectifying process performed by the act that allows the experience presents the same object across a multitude of different sense presentations (Husserl, 2001, pp. 105–4). In short, if we were not aware of acts, we would not be aware of objects. As Moore rejects mental content, the second part of this strategy is unavailable to him.

Let me also quickly notice some of the well-known reasons why Moore, together with Russell, rejected the notion of mental content (Husserl's '*inhalt*'). This will be helpful to give more context to Moore's philosophy of mind. One was that all differences between acts can be fully accounted for in terms of differences between their objects, and thus that inner differences between acts are superfluous (Moore, 1910); see also (Künne, 1990, pp. 190ff.). Another was that mental content goes undetected by introspection, and thus we have no reason to believe it exists (Moore, 1903b, pp. 452–453; Russell, 1921, pp. 142–143). See (Textor, 2021, p. 223ff.) for an extensive summary of Moore's and Russell's arguments against mental content. Interestingly, some of Moore's interlocutors argued that transparency gets its intuitive grip, and is the obvious consequence of, his rejection of the act-content-object tripartite picture of mental acts. Hicks (1909, 1916; Hicks in Laird et al., 1920) was particularly vocal and lucid about this; but I reserve the analysis of his criticism for another paper.

After 1910, Moore accepts that self-awareness need not be objectifying; but he also writes that there is an observable fact about mental acts. This is, as we have just seen, that acts are ‘mine’, i.e., they can only exist as long as I have them. I can (retrospectively) observe that an act has ceased to be lived through by me, and this implies that it has ceased to exist. Thus, even though the subject cannot *directly observe* the act-object distinction because of the difficulties raised by Stout and Hicks, they can nonetheless be aware of it in two ways: (i) by living through the act, but not the object and (ii), *indirectly*, by observing the difference in ontological status between acts vis-à-vis their objects (namely the fact that the former are mind-dependent, while the latter are mind-independent).

To sum up, my suggestion is that one important reason why Moore turned to *Erlebnis* is to highlight a difference in the way acts are related to the self that is (i) available to the subject in inner awareness and (ii) defined in contrast with how objects of the acts are apprehended by the self. In addition, one can observe the different ontological statuses of acts in contrast with their objects in retrospection. (Incidentally, this seems to suggest that Moore now reserves to introspection the sole function of retrospection).

I shall conclude this section by assessing this strategy. Assuming that there really is a kind of non-objectifying self-awareness of mental acts, how does this strategy fare with respect to the problem posed by transparency?

A possible objection runs as follows. Consider again (a) and (b) above, that is, the case in which I observe that a sense datum has ceased to be presented to me *and* it has ceased to exist (because it has ceased to be perceptible, like a spark fading away), and it has ceased to be presented to me but not to exist (because I have turned my head away). I gather that the idea is partly that, in (b), my awareness of my seeing remains constant, though the objects of my awareness have changed. However, Moore’s general point is “that [an act] has ceased to exist is [...] a part of what I observe in observing that it has ceased to be lived through”. Can we indeed be aware of the fact that, once we have stopped performing some mental act *M*, *M* has ceased to exist? There is one interpretation of this claim that makes it obviously true and one that does not.

On the true interpretation, we can be fairly sure that if I close my eyes, I stop seeing, and the seeing also ceases to exist. (Some people might object to this, claiming that, when we close our eyes, we see the inside of our lids, but we don’t stop seeing: one ceases to see only when one goes to sleep; this point can be conceded, as it doesn’t pose serious problems for the view under discussion). Similarly, if at  $t_1$  I think ‘today I’ll finally finish this paper’ and at  $t_2$  ‘I don’t know what to prepare for dinner’, I can be fairly sure that the first thought has ceased to exist at  $t_2$ .

On the other interpretation, things might be trickier. Consider the familiar case of figuring out how to write a difficult passage in a paper. After some time wrestling with this problem, I might finally decide to abandon the task for the time being, only to have the most effective prose pop up in my head at a later time. In this and similar cases, it is not obvious to me that, when I observe that I have stopped occurrently thinking that  $p$ , I also observe that the thought that  $p$  has ceased to exist. Perhaps it has gone unconscious; this is one way to explain how solutions to problems we have been thinking about for a while and then set aside can pop up in one’s head at a later time (see e.g., Coleman, 2025).

A less controversial case is desire: where does my desire to adopt a cat go when I am not occurrently desiring? I do not want to attempt to answer this difficult question here. My sole aim is to show that it is not obvious that “that [an act] has ceased to exist is [...] a part of what I observe in observing that it has ceased to be lived through”. If we want to give any credit to the talk of unconscious or dispositional states, when acts cease to be lived through, they need not cease to exist. They might *seem* to do so (you think to yourself, ‘I thought I had forgotten this!’; as an old memory floods through your mind); but their ceasing to exist is not, in fact, an observable fact.

To be sure, the doctrine of *Erlebnis* is untouched by evaluations on the validity of Moore’s argument I have just examined. There are independent reasons to support the thesis that acts are not experienced as objects of awareness but as lived through, and I provided a brief overview of these in this paper. Whether this leaves us with the awareness that they are mind-dependent entities, and thus of a different kind than physical entities, is, however, doubtful. The fact that acts and their objects are given to us in different ways *may* suggest that there is a fundamental metaphysical difference between mental entities and their objects, but this cannot be established on the sole basis of introspection.

## 4 Conclusions

The paper traced the evolution of Moore’s view on consciousness and self-awareness over the decade 1901–1916, from an observational perspective on consciousness to a more complex, hybrid view, in which individuals are directly aware of the objects of their consciousness while they experience or “live through” their mental states. I have offered some reasons to read this whole evolution as an attempt to defend the introspectability of the act-object distinction in defence of a dualistic framework. I also suggested that there was a convergence between the debate on objectifying versus non-objectifying self-awareness in the early British analytic tradition, which influenced Moore’s view on this matter.

I do not believe Moore’s view on inner awareness ceased to evolve after 1916. In 1920, Moore suggested that cognitive acts are exhausted by the event of the holding of the relation between a sense-datum and a universal character that the sense-datum appears to have (Laird et al., 1920, p. 137). It seems to me that this view fully externalises the act, and it is thus incompatible with the introspectability of the act-object distinction. I chose not to include these remarks in this paper, because a discussion of this topic would require a further, lengthy discussion on the nature of cognitive acts, which would be interesting but would drift us too far away from the topic of this paper.

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