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Publisher: Routledge
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UK



Philosophical Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors
and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cphp20>

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Available online: 19 Aug 2010

To cite this article: Russ McBride (1999): Consciousness and the state/transitive/
creature distinction, *Philosophical Psychology*, 12:2, 181-196

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/095150899105864>

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Consciousness and the state/transitive/creature distinction

RUSS MCBRIDE

ABSTRACT *This essay examines the grammatical structure underlying the use of the word “conscious”. Despite the existence of this grammatical structure, I reject the assumption that actual consciousness has a similar structure. Specifically, I reject the claim that consciousness consists of three subtypes: state consciousness, transitive consciousness, and creature consciousness. I offer an inductive argument and a deductive argument that no such psychological entities exist. The inductive argument: given the lack of evidence or arguments for the entities and given that a tripartite consciousness structure evolved from a tripartite grammatical habit, it would be far too coincidental if the grammatical distinction mirrored a psychological distinction. The deductive argument (a reductio ad absurdum) shows that absurd conclusions follow from assuming the existence of three distinct psychological entities. Furthermore, the verbal habits that motivate the distinction are rendered more intelligible under a “Unitary Thesis”, the idea that verbal distinctions involving use of the word “conscious” are unified in their reliance on a single ontological unit, that of conscious experience.*

Language has many properties which are not shared by things in general, and when these properties intrude into our metaphysic it becomes altogether misleading. (Russell, 1923)

1. A property of the English language

I want to look at a property of the English language that I believe has nothing to do with consciousness. Of course, the study of consciousness would be much easier if we could simply look to some language, analyze *its* structure, and proclaim thereby to understand the nature of consciousness as well. It would be much easier, for example, if because we sometimes formed dangling participles we could infer that a fundamental structure of the mind included a “dangling consciousness”, or that because we occasionally split infinitives that an essential feature of the mind included a “split infinitiveness”. It doesn’t, of course, but if I could have made these points sound reasonable to my eighth grade English teacher, she would’ve at least found my grammar excuses far more interesting.

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These aren't real features of the mind. And to infer their existence in the way I tried is to infer illegitimately, because the ontology of the mind is not the same as the ontology of language. This should be obvious. Yet despite the difference it's easy to confuse language with the mind specifically when one uses language to talk *about* the mind, when one uses mind words, like the word "conscious". Still, as with any other word, it's important to keep separate our two ontologies. I don't wake up and begin my day of conscious experiences with a big letter "C" looming above my bed, even though the *word* "conscious" begins with the letter "C". The same separation should be maintained between the ontology of the mind and other linguistic features of the word "conscious", whatever they are.

As it happens, if you look at how the word is used long enough, interesting grammatical patterns emerge from the low-lying fog of everyday talk. "Conscious" is used as an adjective in a couple of different ways, and it's used as part of a transitive verb phrase. "Conscious" is used:

1. As an adjective for mental states:

- My conscious fear kept me alert for potential freeway obstacles.
- Her conscious belief left her feeling confident.
- Jeff's conscious anticipation kept him hopeful.

In these cases "conscious" is used as an adjective that modifies a reference to a mental state.

2. As part of a transitive verb phrase:

- Sally was *conscious of* the sound of footsteps behind her.
- Bruce became *conscious of* the intimidating size of Mt. Shasta.
- Jim was *conscious of* the rattlesnake, but it was too late.

In these cases the "conscious of" transitive verb phrase is used to indicate awareness of some object or state of affairs.

3. As an adjective for creatures:

- Kirk was conscious until Spock administered a Vulcan death grip.
- Bob was conscious after the surgery.
- Sally is still conscious.

In these cases "conscious" is used as an adjective that modifies a reference to a creature.

We can bring these three usage habits under the umbrella of a single term—the state/transitive/creature distinction. The existence of this distinction is a simple linguistic fact. That is, it's just a plain fact about the English language that we use the word "conscious" in three different ways, as an adjective that modifies references to mental states, as part of a transitive verb phrase, and as an adjective that modifies references to creatures. These are interesting linguistic facts, but, to repeat, they've got little to do with consciousness itself.

2. The taxonomy applied to consciousness

Still, it's easy to misread linguistic patterns into reality, but especially so in analytic philosophy where ontological claims are driven by conceptual analysis, and conceptual analysis is driven by language. As Russell knew, "The influence of symbolism on philosophy is mainly unconscious; if it were conscious it would do less harm" (1923, p. 8). I imagine, then, that an unsuspecting tendency to see reflections of language in the dark mystery of consciousness is what has motivated some to find a perfect analogue of the tripartite grammatical distinction in the basic structure of consciousness itself.

David Rosenthal (1993a, p. 335) has looked into the mystery and said:

When we speak of consciousness, both in ordinary and in scientific contexts, there are three distinct phenomena we commonly refer to ... [A] little reflection on various cases is enough to show that the three do not always occur together, and clearly distinguishing among them turns out to be crucial for theoretical purposes.

According to Rosenthal [1], the grammatical distinction we've uncovered points to an important fact about the ontology of the mind. It points to three actual psychological structures, three consciousnesses. Interestingly enough Fred Dretske, who rejects Rosenthal's Higher Order theory, still finds the three-term distinction valuable enough to serve as the foundation for his own competing theory [2]. In each approach, the three-part ontology serves as the lock-pin, the conceptual foundation upon which the theory rests.

There's a reason such divergent theories have grasped onto the state/transitive/creature distinction—and most theories can be read as tacitly relying on the distinction—Pollock's (1989) theory for building a conscious robot, for example, Johnson-Laird's (1988) hierarchical theory of consciousness, and Lycan's intentionality-driven theory, to name a few [3]. And the reason is this: the distinction is the best effort yet put forth to ground the common sense Freudian conception of consciousness, the Higher Order theories of consciousness, or any intentionality-driven theory of consciousness in general.

The usual "grounding" strategy proceeds as follows. Take consciousness to be a general phenomenon that reduces down to state and transitive components, where transitive consciousness is intentionality-rich and also, for whatever reason, the most important, i.e. the most fundamental component. (It's obviously intentionality-rich since, by definition, it's consciousness *of* something.) Hence, the complex of consciousness is essentially intentional and can successfully be teased apart with [fill in the blank]'s intentionality theory. Lycan (1987, p. 87) illustrates this intentionality-first approach:

We are sometimes conscious or aware of objects or events in the physical world. The items may be present to our sense, or we may learn of them at secondhand, through hearsay or other indirect evidence. We have a standard case of mental aboutness; the "of"-ness in question is the traditional arrow of intentionality ... There is no special problem about consciousness

	state	creature
transitive	XXXXXX	transitive creature- consciousness "transitive consciousness" (transitive phrase)
intransitive	intransitive state-consciousness "state-consciousness" (adjective)	intransitive creature- consciousness "creature consciousness" (adjective)

FIG. 1.

or awareness over and above the problem of intentionality as traditionally framed.

And that (non-special) problem is now solvable (so it's said) with the state/transitive/creature distinction.

Now you might be able to see why such divergent theorists as Rosenthal and Dretske have latched onto the distinction, and why other consciousness theories are easily interpreted and rendered more plausible in light of the distinction. We all believe that intentionality permeates conscious experience, somehow or other. This is the one point of agreement. Transitive consciousness provides the perfect missing piece, the intentionality-rich piece that can be shuffled around and mixed and matched with other pieces until one has got a satisfactory theory. It's a tool custom-made for a huge backlog of jobs philosophers have been struggling with, but for which, up to now, they have lacked adequate resources.

Figure 1 shows the three categories of the distinction, listing Rosenthal's original terminology in each box, my abbreviated term in quotes underneath, and the grammatical type from which it evolved. (There is no "state-transitive" category since, assumedly, mental states can't be *conscious of* anything, although creatures can be, hence the Xs in that box.) Again, it's important to realize that the three categories are considered to be not just grammatical categories, but real honest-to-goodness psychological structures of the mind.

State consciousness is that psychological *property* certain mental states possess, the conscious ones. (Note that state consciousness is not a state of the organism overall; it refers specifically to *a state of mentality* of the organism.) When I say that my fear is conscious, I'm using an adjective to describe a conscious mental state of fear. Mental states are not conscious of anything and my fear is not conscious

of something (although *I* might be); it's simply conscious or unconscious (hence *intransitive*).

Transitive consciousness, on the other hand, is that intentionality-rich psychological *property* exhibited when a creature (you or me, for example) is conscious *of* something. It's the spotlight, so to speak. Used as such, "conscious" is often claimed to be synonymous with "aware".

Creature consciousness is that psychological *property* in virtue of which we use the adjective "conscious" (and not a transitive phrase) to talk about our understanding of creatures. In other words, it's the property that they lack when they are in a dreamless sleep, comatose, knocked out, or otherwise unresponsive to their surroundings. A summary example: I am conscious, i.e. awake and responsive (so I possess creature consciousness), and I am conscious *of* the cars speeding down the freeway (transitive consciousness), before I develop a conscious fear (state consciousness).

3. An inductive argument against the distinction

Attempting to explain this distinction to my peers, I've discovered that most people find the terminology very confusing. I recommend thinking about the distinction in terms of the word-use pattern from which it grew—an adjective for mental states, a transitive verb phrase for creatures, and an adjective for creatures—it makes more sense this way. The distinction, as an *ontological* distinction, is difficult to grasp because it contradicts our basic understanding of consciousness. Most people (out of a sense of these contradictions I think) begin a battery of questions. I am concerned with only one: can we infer something about the ontology of the mind from an ontology of grammar? Specifically, does this three-part structure of consciousness, grounded in linguistic habit, carve nature at its joints? Science has a long history of theoretical terms that have failed to denote (e.g. phlogiston) and ontologies that haven't fit the phenomena. Is the tripartite distinction an ontological model that fits anything in the real world of genuine mental entities?

Evidence is needed, or a report on how the distinction-to-world fitting is progressing. Surprisingly, none are offered, nor are any arguments in support of the three-part ontology. Certainly evidence could be offered for distinct consciousnesses. Commisurotomy patients appear to manifest two consciousnesses corresponding to the two sides of the brain after their corpus callosum is cut. In these cases there is obvious evidence (traumatic brain alteration, resulting behavioral oddities, etc.). What evidence do we have for the claim that there are three consciousnesses? Only the evidence of a grammatical pattern. One would be more convinced if new terms were proposed to name psychological structures previously discovered through experimentation (or undeniable in the face of conceptual constraints).

So, given the lack of evidence (or arguments) for the proposed consciousness types, and given the origin of the theory from a chance grammatical pattern of habit (rather than experimentation), it would be far too neat, too coincidentally lucky if the terminology named genuine psychological structures. I conclude that there are no such structures. No matter how many words I have for "sun" there is only

TABLE 1.

	Combination no.							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
State consciousness	y	n	n	y	n	y	n	y
Transitive consciousness	y	n	y	n	n	n	y	y
Creature consciousness	y	n	n	n	y	y	y	n

y = yes, it manifested; n = no, it didn't manifest.

one sun in our solar system. And no matter how many words I have for "consciousness", that by itself is no evidence for multiple consciousnesses. Grammatical distinctions in no way bolster ontological distinctions, and when the only support in favor of an ontology is grammatical, that ontology has no support at all. The state/transitive/creature distinction is not real.

4. A deductive argument against the distinction

Many will protest that I jumped the gun, that my argument is *only* inductive, likely at best, but not conclusive. Although admittedly improbable, they say, it could very well turn out that the ontology of mind really mirrors the ontology of grammar. Very well. Let me offer a deductive argument for the same conclusion. If state consciousness = transitive consciousness = creature consciousness, there's obviously no real distinction (as I claim). To be *non-identical* psychological entities, each term must refer to a *distinct* entity, and the developer of the distinction, Rosenthal, claims that it does denote distinct entities. Recall his quote above:

When we speak of consciousness, both in ordinary and in scientific contexts, there are three distinct phenomena we commonly refer to ... [A] little reflection on various cases is enough to show that the three do not always occur together, and clearly distinguishing among them turns out to be crucial for theoretical purposes.

So by "distinct phenomena" he means phenomena that manifest without one another, i.e. that are non-perfectly correlative. And here is where the distinction contradicts our basic understanding of consciousness.

Assume for the moment that the distinction is legitimate, that there are three distinct types of consciousness. There are then $2^3 = 8$ possibilities, each representing a combination of the three phenomena that can manifest at any given time (Table 1). Obviously the first two columns of Table 1 are no help in showing the independent, distinct nature of each consciousness, because all rise and fall together. But what about the next six? These are six clear *reducciones ad absurdum* against the possibility of three distinct consciousnesses! To see how, ask yourself what the next column describes. Column (3) describes the possibility of manifesting transitive

consciousness without state or creature consciousness. In other words, it illustrates the possibility of becoming conscious of something without possessing a conscious mental state or even being conscious in the first place! If someone told me he was conscious (i.e. aware) of something, but lacked a conscious mental state, and lacked even consciousness I'd ask him to repeat the joke because I must have missed the punchline. Isn't this a pre-theoretical requirement on any consciousness theory—that if you're conscious *of* something you must first be conscious? To show otherwise, as the combination matrix does, is to show the falsity of the theory.

Let me lay out this *reductio* argument as clearly as possible:

- a. Assume that state, transitive, and creature consciousness are distinct mental phenomena (Rosenthal's assumption).
- b. Distinct phenomena can manifest distinctly, i.e. independently (premise).
- c. Of the many possible combinations in which state, transitive, and creature consciousness can manifest is one where transitive consciousness is present, but state and creature consciousness are not present [inference from (a) and (b)].

But something has gone wrong because (c) is plainly absurd. How could someone be conscious of something without possessing a conscious state of any sort or even being conscious at all? They can't. Therefore, we must reject the assumption and conclude:

- d. State, transitive, and creature consciousness are *not* distinct mental phenomena.

In other words, they are not really separate. The distinction is a distinction in name alone.

I only need one case to drive through my conclusion against the distinction, but I'll offer two more, illustrated by columns (4) and (5) in Table 1. What does column (4) describe? That one could possess a conscious mental state, but not be conscious of anything! This is the very purpose of the higher-order-style theories, like Rosenthal's, to cash out consciousness as just another form of intentionality. But possessing a conscious state without the directed, intentional, transitive component is precisely what shouldn't be possible. The intentionality component must always be present before any other, if it is primary. This generates a separate but equally damaging *reductio* against the distinction, as does (5), the possibility that one could be awake and alert, but not be conscious of anything, nor possess a conscious state. Even in the extreme case of, for example, a Zen monk who can purportedly be conscious but not conscious *of* anything, we say that he possesses a conscious state (of some sort or other). So this too seems absurd.

Clearly something has gone wrong and the possibility of these combinations illustrates just what went wrong. If you are building an explanation of consciousness from the state/transitive/creature subtypes, you are accepting a distinction. And in accepting that distinction you are accepting that state consciousness, transitive consciousness, and creature consciousness, are distinct. You are granting the possibility of one manifesting without the others. But examined carefully, it is precisely

the distinctness of the proposed phenomena that leads to such absurdity in the possibilities. Therefore, the distinction is illegitimate.

It could be said that I have been approaching the matter too crudely. I am failing to take into account the important *relationships* that hold between the consciousness subtypes, relationships that block any absurdities. Dretske (1993) takes this line, stipulating that, in addition to the existence of the basic phenomena, a relationship holds between creature consciousness and transitive consciousness such that one can't be conscious of anything (transitive consciousness) unless one is already creature conscious (i.e. awake). This is a reasonable claim and would (granting the best possible scenario for Dretske) block combinations 3, 5, 6, and 8 in the table. He also says that if one possesses transitive consciousness, then one must possess state consciousness [4]. This blocks combinations 3, 4, 6, and 7. The absurdities, then, that arise in cases 3, 4, or 5, and indeed, any problems that might arise in the last six interesting possibility combinations are nipped in the bud because the possibilities themselves are declared impossible. The distinction has been successfully defended, right? Not so fast. You may have noticed something fishy here—there is no distinction left! The unintended result is that once the stipulated relationships rule out possibilities 3–8, *it follows that there is no distinction*. If the only possibility is no. 1 (where all appear together) or no. 2 (where none appear), then there is no possibility of any sort of distinctness among the purportedly distinct entities.

Furthermore, the problem in trying to maneuver around the absurdities is simply that it begs the question. In condoning such maneuvers we would be tacitly agreeing to the premise of the maneuvers, namely, that there are state, transitive, and creature consciousness entities in the first place. And this, of course, is precisely the question at issue. We would be encouraging an implausible ontology, and accepting the burden of proof to argue against an ontology that has not been argued for. Surely this is a job for Okham's razor.

In Rosenthal's most recent work (1998) he offers real world examples that endeavor to convince us that the purported phenomena can manifest independently as described in column (7), creature consciousness with transitive, but no state consciousness. If he's right, then there really are distinct consciousnesses of the sort proposed. Here's the relevant passage:

Often this connection [between state and transitive consciousness] does not hold. To make one's way when driving or walking somewhere, one must be visually conscious of many obstacles. But one may well be wholly unaware that one is conscious of those obstacles if, for example, one is immersed in conversation. Other cases abound. The so-called cocktail-party effect occurs when one screens out the sounds of conversations other than one's own. Still, if one's name is mentioned in a conversation one had screened out, one's attention immediately shifts to that conversation, showing that one must have had auditory consciousness of what was being said. Such cases do not immediately occur to us precisely because in these cases we are not aware of being conscious of these things. (p. 743)

The “truck driver effect”, as it is sometimes called, the effect that arises from absentmindedly driving for long shifts or on familiar roads, illustrates the case of an individual who is conscious in one sense and unconscious in another sense. There is a sense in which he is conscious of the road. How could he keep the truck in its lane otherwise? In another sense, though, the driver must *lack* consciousness because he has no conscious belief about the pothole he mindlessly swerved around. We can explain this inconsistency, according to Rosenthal, in that the driver is transitively conscious (he is conscious *of* the road), but lacks state consciousness (he lacks a conscious mental state, a conscious belief about the road). Similarly, the party attendee is conscious of his own conversation, but not of the other distant conversations. But he must have been conscious of them in some sense. How could he have heard his name mentioned otherwise? Again, this is a case of transitive consciousness without state consciousness, we are told. Rosenthal appears to believe that consciousness is required for complex cognitive activity, and that it is this consciousness that explains the successful, inattentive, driving, and explains the ability to pick out one’s own name in a distant unattended conversation.

My response to this claim is twofold. First, the entire history of cognitive science inclines in the other direction, showing that most cognitive activity is profoundly *unconscious*. The conclusion of these well-known examples [5], firmly established since the 1950s, is that “people can be conscious of only one densely coherent stream of events at a time” (see, for example, Baars, 1988, for an excellent survey). It’s precisely a lack of consciousness that makes these cases so intriguing because they bring to the fore the fact that we perform all sorts of complex behaviors unconscious of a myriad of details.

Second, let’s assume that the man at the cocktail party *was* conscious of the distant conversations in some sense. Why does it have to be the case that there is a *different* kind of consciousness at work? Why can’t it just be less of the same old thing? Rosenthal’s interpretation relies, crucially, on the intuition that in each case there is a *type* of consciousness missing, and another type present, rather than just regular old consciousness, albeit diminished. Many are inclined simply to say that the party attendee was “sort of” conscious of the distant conversation, that the driver was “sort of” conscious of the road. If this intuition strikes you as faintly reasonable then you won’t see anything particularly shocking that warrants going so far as to postulate a fundamentally new category of psychological phenomena. Something extra is needed to warrant such a dramatic maneuver, something not found in these examples.

5. The Unitary Thesis

We can sketch a theory of consciousness that’s more reasonable and offers a better explanation of verbal practice than a distinction-based theory. I call my proposed alternative explanation, the Unitary Thesis. It’s the thesis that all this confusion really collapses under its own weight down onto the bedrock notion of conscious experience, and that conscious experience always has qualitative content, however vague and diffuse that content may be. So, every conscious state is at the same time (what could be called) a transitive state. Further, the degree to which someone

is conscious is just the degree to which he manifests conscious experiences that help to guide him through his circumstances. In other words, state consciousness = transitive consciousness = creature consciousness because, ontologically speaking, there is only conscious experience.

I'd like to say that this Unitary Thesis is simply an obvious fact and leave it at that, but of course it's not, as our examination has revealed. So, clarification is in order. Let's start by tacking down the first half of the claim about conscious experience.

Possessing a conscious mental state is a matter of being in a state where one is conscious of something such that, an individual, S, possesses a conscious mental state, M, if and only if S is conscious of some content, X. Such activity is a necessary requirement for conscious experience.

The "if and only if" phrase is a bit of jargon to let us know that, assuming the truth of the biconditional, we can confidently assert the truth of (1) and (2) below, by material equivalence, which is something that we cannot do with the distinction-based theories (since in those theories the existence of one consciousness type can *not* necessarily be inferred from the existence of any other):

1. If S is conscious of some content, X, then S possesses a conscious mental state, M.
2. If S possesses a conscious mental state, M, then S is conscious of some content, X.

"Content" needs clarification. I use it in its most general, uninformative sense such that anything, however vague, if one can be conscious of it, can be considered content, real or otherwise—the hallucination of a UFO, a fact, a dog, or a feeling of regret.

The Unitary Thesis attempts to render explicit the idea that being conscious of something and having a conscious mental state are two descriptions of one "consciousness event" [6] and not two consciousness events (a state conscious event and a transitive conscious event). So, per (1), the fact that I'm conscious of, e.g. an earthquake, implies that I must possess a conscious mental state and, per (2), the fact that I have a conscious mental state implies that I must be conscious *of* something, in this case an earthquake. This unifies what, under the distinction, would otherwise be thought of as two distinct phenomena, state consciousness and transitive consciousness.

Let me make it clear that I am not advocating the Cartesian view that all mental states are conscious. Still, an objection can be made: perhaps creature consciousness *does* represent an actual (distinct) consciousness type even though state consciousness and transitive consciousness do not. Is it distinct? I submit that creature consciousness is not a separate *type of consciousness*, but again just another way of referencing the phenomenon of conscious experience, specifically the relevance and appropriateness of an individual's conscious experiences. When the doctor says, "It was a long surgery but Bob is now conscious", the adjective, "conscious", applied

to a (human) creature is a grammatical technique that allows us to talk about degrees of alertness.

Emergency medical technicians (EMTs) rate a patient's level of consciousness on awareness scales, like one called "Alert and oriented times four". It uses the ability of the patient to focus on and recall certain facts as criteria for the patient's level of consciousness. The EMT asks four questions: (1) What is your name? (2) Do you know where you are? (3) Do you know what you were doing when the accident happened? (4) Do you know why you are here? This test, of course, is a test about what facts (or beliefs) the patient can bring to consciousness. Practitioners have since switched to a more fine-grained test for awareness, the Glasgow-Coma scale, which uses 10 criteria. Both are attempts to provide rudimentary means by which consciousness can be measured.

And so medical practitioners (not to mention each of us in our everyday "practice of life") assess an individual's degree of alertness according to: (1) our estimate of the individual's internal experiences, and (2) the appropriateness of those experiences as revealed in their behavioral effects, especially speech. On the one hand, our assessment depends on the subject's conscious experiences (or at least what we believe them to be), since what she is conscious of, and in what way, determines how alert she is to her surroundings. If I ask Susan to pass the salt and she simply snores loudly, I infer that Susan is less conscious than I am, and that her current experiences probably have little to do with the dining room, the food, and my interesting (or so I thought it to be) conversation. When I say that the trail-jogger is more conscious than the siesta-napper, I say so because I believe that the trail-jogger is more alert than the siesta-napper, in that he has conscious experiences which enable to him navigate and interact with his environment more effectively. But the trail-jogger doesn't possess a conscious experience of some special sort, of some special "creature conscious" type; it's just regular old conscious experience.

Determining the degree of consciousness in any subject requires a judgment about how closely the subject's conscious experiences compare with what the assessor deems appropriate conscious experiences given the circumstances, and this judgment is made on the basis of common sense expectations. If during dinner I replace Bob's soup spoon with a large alligator, which proceeds to envelop his arm between its jaws, I expect Bob to experience surprise and pain. If he instead carries on with dinner, attempting to finish his soup with a large alligator attached to his arm, I'll conclude that there is something seriously wrong with Bob. Why? Because Bob fails to react to his unique circumstances, and that failure to react stems from a failure of conscious realization. He lacks the appropriate internal experience, the conscious realization that there is an alligator attached to his arm. Of course, the conscious realization that I, as an assessor, deem appropriate is not of some *special* type, and so there's no need for me to postulate any especially unique form of consciousness that may be missing.

So in examining the use of the adjective "conscious", as it is applied to creatures, one must discuss good old-fashioned conscious experiences or the behavioral criteria according to which those experiences are evaluated. But in neither case is there a need to postulate a new psychological phenomenon,

“creature consciousness”, only consciousness simpliciter [7] which, analyzed into snapshot experiences, can be thought of as indicative of various levels of alertness. Understanding this point allows us to tack down the second half of the Unitary Thesis.

The second half of the Unitary Thesis:

For some individual, *S*, and *S*'s conscious experiences in some context, *CE-in-C*, *S* is declared to be conscious to some degree, *D*, by an assessor, *A*, based upon how closely *CE-in-C* compares with *A*'s criteria for appropriate conscious experience, *Crit-CE-in-C*.

More simply put, an assessor watches behavior and makes a guess about what conscious experiences the subject has in some situation, before deciding how closely such experiences compare to definitively conscious experiences. This implies that even the most minimalist criteria for appropriate conscious experience in a given context, *Crit-CE-in-C*, must still demand that an individual possess *some* conscious experiences before being assessed as conscious (to any degree). Imagine driving upon an accident where a victim lies groaning in his car. After confirming the basics (that his airway is not obstructed, that he's breathing, and that he's not losing blood), you begin asking questions to assess his level of consciousness and hence whether there might be head injury—"Do you know who you are?", "Do you know what happened?", "Do you know where you are?" Answering the questions correctly is not enough, otherwise I could program my tape recorder to answer correctly and then deem it conscious. His responses are used only to guide our assessment of his ability to bring to consciousness certain facts. Based on his reply, we determine whether he has brought forth the kinds of facts we consider appropriate, given the questions we have asked. If he can't even reply with irrelevant facts, if he can't bring forth anything to consciousness, then he is deemed unconscious, i.e. lacking in any conscious experiences. The behavior is used to guide our assessment of the individual's conscious experiences since they are what's important.

So any *Crit-CE-in-C*, any criteria for consciousness in context, must require *some* conscious experiences on the part of the individual being assessed (however vague and poorly connected to the world) before that individual can be deemed conscious. And we know from the first half of the Unitary Thesis that any conscious experience involves consciousness of some content. Therefore, if an individual is (correctly) deemed conscious, and being conscious implies that the individual must possess some conscious experiences, and possessing conscious experiences implies that the individual must be conscious of some content, then being conscious implies that the individual must be conscious of some content. So the two halves of the Unitary Thesis link together nicely.

The full Unitary Thesis:

Possessing a conscious mental state is a matter of being in a state where one is conscious of something such that, an individual, *S*, possesses a conscious mental state, *M*, if and only if *S* is conscious of some content, *X*. Such activity is a necessary requirement for conscious experience.

For some individual, *S*, and *S*'s conscious experiences in some context, *CE-in-C*, *S* is declared to be conscious to some degree, *D*, by an assessor,

A, based upon how closely CE-in-C compares with A's criteria for appropriate conscious experience, Crit-CE-in-C. Any assessment of D (above zero) therefore demands that S have some conscious experience directed at X, and some M.

What would otherwise be understood as distinct consciousnesses are now understood as a related unity. An individual is conscious when and only when that individual is conscious of something, and that individual is conscious of something when and only when the individual has a conscious mental state. But all of this is bound to, and determines under some criteria, the degree of alertness. Of course, the Unitary Thesis as it stands is not much of an explanation of consciousness (as such it would be circular), but rather a plausible set of conceptual constraints on any theory of consciousness.

6. Implications

A couple of tangles can now be straightened with the unified notion of conscious experience, one being the debate between those who explicitly rely on the tripartite distinction, but do so to leverage conflicting theories. Is a conscious mental state the *effect* of transitive consciousness (the claim of the Higher Order theorists)? Or does it *cause* an instance of transitive consciousness (Dretske's position)? Given that the referents in question (state consciousness and transitive consciousness) are illegitimate since the distinction itself is illegitimate, the disputes that presume such referents are nonsensical. Hence, the debate is dissolved.

Another tangle is the purportedly difficult dream contradiction. Many are inclined to say that although we are unconscious while asleep, we manifest certain seemingly conscious events. Hence the contradiction: "While dreaming I am unconscious", but "while dreaming I *am* conscious (of imaginary events)" How can it be possible to be simultaneously both conscious and unconscious? This contradiction is sometimes taken as evidence for the distinction I have argued against in that we can look at the case of dreaming as a case where the dreamer, while asleep, lacks creature consciousness, but possesses transitive consciousness (and assumedly state consciousness) as shown by the fact that the dreamer is conscious of certain events, albeit imaginary. Although the crown jewel of the three-part ontology is really the distinction between state and transitive consciousness, it seems that this real-life example is nonetheless important evidence for the distinct nature of (at least) creature consciousness, and hence for the distinction itself.

Did we make a wrong turn somewhere? I don't think so. As our investigation into purported creature consciousness should make totally clear by now, the assessment of consciousness (alertness) is not a bifurcated affair. We know, not only from how medical technicians treat patients, but from everyday experience that consciousness admits of degrees; it's not an on/off affair. Some days I'm just more alert than others. Some nights I spend quite a while in that intermediate zone between wakefulness and sleep, and even after falling into a deep dream-filled sleep I'm still not as unconscious as someone in a true coma. A genuine phenomenologically barren coma lacks all experience; I at least am having dreams. If the Unitary Thesis is correct, that an individual's level of consciousness is assessed according to

the relevance and appropriateness of that individual's internal conscious experiences, then my dreams of flying over the ocean are not connected in the right way to my immediate external environment (my bedroom). So my dreaming satisfies only the most minimal criteria for consciousness—that there be experiential content of some sort, though not necessarily relevant or appropriate. I am not *completely* unconscious, and this resolves the dream contradiction. I can never be both completely conscious and completely unconscious; I can, however, be minimally conscious.

7. Conclusion

The primary purpose of this paper was to show that a certain property of the English language bore no relation to genuine consciousness, that the grammatical structure of the word “conscious” should be quarantined from the ontological structure of the real stuff. The dark mystery of consciousness merely reflected the linguistic apparatus that was brought to it, rather than revealing its own nature. I tried to render this view plausible by offering an inductive argument that deemed it unlikely such a three-part schematic for carving up the human mind should fall fully formed from the womb of grammatical habit. And by way of a deductive argument illustrating the absurdity of the distinction.

Despite the technical jargon and hyphenated abbreviations, the main thrust of the Unitary Thesis was plain: consciousness is about conscious experience. Being in a conscious state, being conscious of something and being conscious to some degree are, rather than distinct mental phenomena, actually bound together in conscious experience. We saw this both in everyday examples, and in the means by which professionals assess levels of consciousness. There is no actual distinction of the state/transitive/creature sort within consciousness. As such, the distinction is no help in getting us closer to an understanding of conscious experience except as an avoidance marker, an avoidance marker that serves as a pointer to some form of Unitary Thesis.

Notes

- [1] The ideas behind this distinction were first laid out in Rosenthal (1986) and made appearances in his works that followed. The distinction itself is most clearly expounded in Rosenthal (1990, 1993a, b, 1998).
- [2] For Rosenthal, state consciousness is created when a creature becomes (transitively) conscious of one of its own mental states. For Dretske, a conscious state is distinguished from a non-conscious state in that a conscious state causes the creature to become (transitively) conscious of something or other.
- [3] It seems reasonable to classify many others as Higher Order theorists as well, for example, Locke, Aristotle, and Churchland. In *An enquiry concerning human understanding*, Locke (1659) expressed his famous claim, “Consciousness is the perception of what passes in a Man’s own mind” (Book II, Chapter 1, §19). In *De anima*, Book III, Chapter 2, Aristotle discusses the difficulties in trying to understand how one becomes aware of a perceptual experience. He concludes that “the sense must be percipient of itself”. And in Chapter 1 he claims there to be no need for a sixth sense necessary to perceive the other five: “There is therefore no special sense required for their

- perception ... The senses perceive each other's objects incidentally; not because the percipient sense is this or that special sense, but because all form a unity". So, the sense primarily involved in the experience must somehow perceive itself to create awareness, and yet in doing so, is uniquely bound to the other four senses. Churchland (1984) said: "In summary, self-consciousness on this view, is just a species of perception: *self-perception*. It is not perception of one's foot with one's eyes, for example, but is rather the perception of one's internal states with what we may call (largely in ignorance) one's faculty of introspection. Self-consciousness is thus no more (and no less) mysterious than perception generally. It is just directed internally rather than externally" (p. 74). Carruthers (1989) and to some degree Armstrong (1981), as well, fall into the Higher Order camp.
- [4] ... since on Dretske's theory (1995), transitive consciousness only arises as a result of state consciousness.
- [5] The long distance truck driver is an example used by among other Armstrong (1981) and Dretske (1993) for different purposes. The discovery of the cocktail party effect was hypothesized by James and confirmed by the work of Cherry (1953) and Broadbent (1958). Other more interesting cases exist, like the Penfield's pianist (1975) who could still play dexterously even after the onset of a petit mal seizure, or another patient who could still make his way home through busy streets while having a seizure, though he would lack a memory of the journey. In all the cases there is a strong inclination to say that the individuals successfully cope (at least minimally and non-creatively) despite a lack of awareness, either of everything (as in the seizure cases) or in regards to a subset of the environment (the road, a distant conversation, in the other cases).
- [6] ... taking for granted, of course, that such descriptions are in the first place snapshots of a dynamic, ongoing process.
- [7] I don't mean to imply that consciousness is a simple phenomena (or that it is unanalyzable), just that it is simple relative to the distinction under question.

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