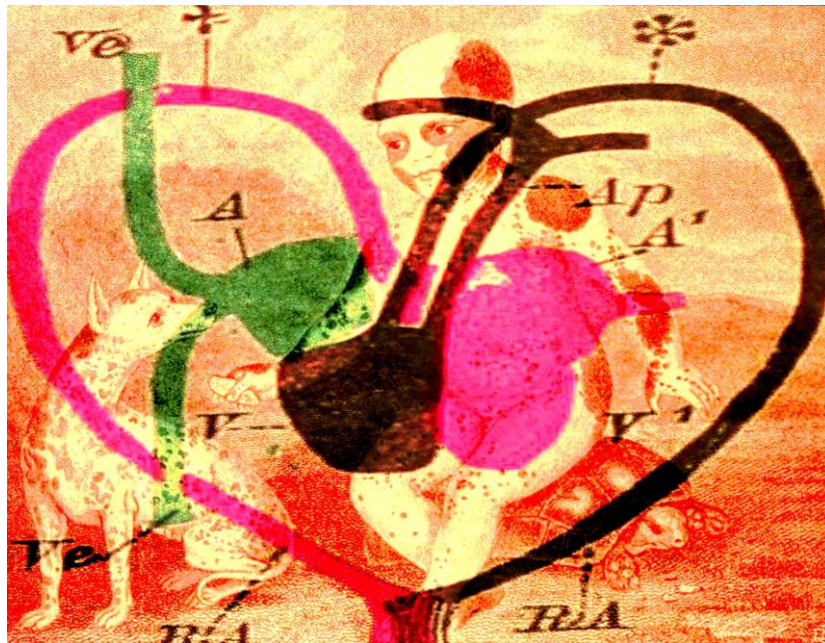


‘Consciousness’ as an ‘identifiable’ something

**An exercise in primordial ontology,
involving observation and reasoning**

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**From an attentive awareness to ‘that’
which identifies this attentive awareness**

Introduction

‘Consciousness’- as a wildly contested philosophical conception - veering from the supposedly ‘obvious’ (!) such as ‘we all know what ‘self-consciousness’ is’ - to the convoluted and unintelligible – such as consciousness is ‘epiphenomenal’ and doesn’t really exist in its own right. Like the popular conception of ‘art’, everyone thinks they know implicitly what consciousness is and amounts to, but are hardpressed to identify it conclusively, let alone articulate exactly what its features might consist of.

The ‘hard’ problem of consciousness is of course an attempt to reconcile concepts which are categorically irreconcilable – the objectively physical with the subjectively non-physical - along the lines of trying to find a way to prove – conclusively - that black and white, despite their apparent polarities, are in fact exactly the same colour; if you’ll only think about it the right way, and negotiate your concepts properly.

So is this going to be all about improving and fine-tuning/tweaking our conceptions? We can try another approach altogether, namely that of exploring an ontology of consciousness, such that even if we are not particularly good at philosophical articulation, we can at least point to the beast we have identified and say ‘that’s what we’re talking about.’ Much of what is

ordinarily considered metaphysics (in specialist circles) is in fact simply delusive chatter, but this can be avoided to the extent we deal with identifiable ontological phenomena.

Identifying consciousness

So how do we go about identifying 'consciousness'? We can begin with a simple everyday characterisation, and then look to see if, by drilling through it, we have captured something substantial, or are merely engaged in an imaginative fantasy.

When I say 'I am conscious right now' I'm making a declaration about a certain state of mind which simultaneously is aware of itself being a 'state of mind', irrespective of the specific content of that 'state of mind'. This 'awareness of itself' can contain – as a supposedly singular object – anything from 'the cup in front of me' to a nebulous thought my picturing (somehow in as a single image) 'the entire universe'.

Now this 'awareness of itself' (of whatever, cup or universe and everything in between) is not quite the same as self-awareness, because self-awareness involves a specific reference to a sense of a specific self, and is not the same as an awareness of a non-self object, such as a cup, or the universe. Many philosophers confuse awareness with self-awareness (ie awareness of a sense of self accompanying a perception), but they are not the same, even if they can easily morph into one another; so 'this cup' and 'this cup is my cup', or 'I am aware of myself looking at this cup' - however subtly 'similar' – are not one and the same perception.

Putting the identification of a 'self' aside, let's drill further into what we might term an elemental 'awareness'. Ordinary awareness stretches from a vague 'something going on' to a 'somewhere right now' to a very specific 'walking down a noisy street' or to a 'being physically attacked on all sides'. We can further specify awareness by describing it as an 'alertness', and we can further concentrate this alertness into an 'attentiveness', meaning 'a something' – physical or mental – is 'grabbing hold of my attention right now'. We're simply showing how a capacity for awareness can stretch from the nebulous to the very specific.

So far so obvious. But are we dealing with objective 'facts' here or merely playing with words? The only way to know would be to present these descriptions to an audience of educated people and ask them if the characterisations are accurate: if they agree that they are accurate, then it follows that – as far as can be ascertained in any ordinary human context – they can be considered to have achieved a measure of intersubjective objectivity. This is not the presentation of a doctrine; it is the presentation of a non-partisan elemental description, intersubjectively agreed upon.

But could these descriptions – in some unforeseen and possibly mysterious way – be 'wrong', meaning quite plainly mistaken? Theoretically, 'yes' – the possibility of error is ever present, even in situations of seemingly irrefutable clarity, but in the pursuit of metaphysical objectivity, it makes no sense to discard everything in the light of an ever-present ontological uncertainty; we have to work with what we have.

And what we have so far is a simple progression from a 'vague awareness' to a 'specific attention' to varieties of objective awareness alternating with self-awareness.

But how do we get from all this to 'consciousness' itself? Are we anywhere near approaching it?

'Conscious' and 'not conscious'

Is it possible to spot a difference between 'conscious' and 'not conscious'? We're hoping, in the process, to see at what point we move from 'not consciousness' to 'consciousness proper', because if we can't do that, then what exactly are we talking about? Would it make any sense to discuss something which we're not able to differentiate from 'that which it is not'? And if a clarified differentiation is not possible – or not 'actual' – what might be going on instead, meaning what sort of a 'differentiation' is implicit behind talk about 'consciousness'?

We don't need to get into a detailed phenomenology as to what we ordinarily decide is our intimate experience of 'self-conscious consciousness' to be able to see that that which we normally accept as self-consciousness is – to all intents and purposes – a variation of 'attentive self-awareness'. The 'self' part of self-awareness or self-consciousness is that distinctive sense of awareness simultaneously 'aware of itself', as a characteristic 'turning in on itself', in which awareness not only seems to 'see itself', it also to tell itself 'I see myself as myself'. This implicit acknowledgement of 'itself as itself' is peculiar and singular to 'self-reflexiveness' and does not occur (at least not ordinarily) in other singular perceptions; in other words, even if I perceive my body as 'my own particular body', this perception of singular ownership does necessarily come with a reflexive sense of the 'self-awareness of the perception of my own body': it can do, but this is different from a more casual sense of a perception of something intimate to 'myself'.

In other words, I can know that the hand on the desk in front of me is 'my hand', but it takes the intrusion of a further piece of information for me to perceive that 'I'm self-reflectively perceiving that my hand is my hand'; and when I do so (self-reflectively) – and to the extent that I allow this reflexive perception to expand – I'm soon struck by the particular singularity of any and all self-reflexive perceptions: these perceptions are often accompanied by a sense of existential weirdness (a 'startlingness'), as if to say 'it's weird to be self-reflectively aware of awareness'.

All well and good. But are we advancing in our quest to establish the identity of 'consciousness'? So far we've established a continuum of states of awareness, stretching from mere perceptions (physical or mental) to reflexively self-aware perceptions (physical or mental), and it doesn't seem much to matter whether we decide these perceptions are the result of 'awareness' or of 'consciousness' – the labels are interchangeable insofar as they involve elemental perceptions (of the physical) or apperceptions (of the mental.)

No 'state of non-consciousness'

At this point things become genuinely complicated. Going back to an earlier comment – are we able to clearly demarcate the difference between 'awareness' and 'non-awareness' (or 'unawareness')? Similarly, between 'consciousness' and 'non-consciousness' (or 'unconsciousness')? In a word, no! Why? Because it is not possible to not be aware (or anything at all), just as it is not possible not to be conscious (of anything all). One is always aware of something, no matter how nebulous and indistinct, and however devoid of specific content. This can be proved in an instant: try not to be aware of anything at all – even if you think you can manage it (you can't) you'll have to be aware of your achievement; this has nothing to do with the paradoxical; it's a feature of ordinary everyday experience.

This being true, how then do we distinguish between consciousness and non- or unconsciousness? Truth is, we have no 'state of non-consciousness'; we have only states which vary on a continuum between fixed and lucid attentiveness (at one end) and vague and

nebulous nothing-in-particular-ness (at the other). Even supposed 'unconsciousness' amounts to a time-limited perception or apperception of 'blankness' or 'nothingness' or perhaps a 'can't-remember-anythingness'.

For example; a subject being brought to wakefulness in a bed could be asked by someone 'what happened to you?', with that subject then having to scan their memory for information, ending in the reply 'I don't know. What did happen?' They then might be informed of an accident, or a blackout or whatever – they might then have no direct memory of such events, but their experiential continuum does not contain an absolute experiential void; it simply does not contain material that might be appropriate to a 'what happened?'-type question.

So where does all this lead? It leads to the fact that what we call (human) 'consciousness' is not, and cannot be, about the polarities of specific perceptions as opposed to absolute non-perceptions, but rather about variations of perceptual clarity, from blank indeterminacy to attentive fixation.

We might well be prepared to concede all of this while still feeling the explanation we are really after – namely a resolution to the experiential mystery of the provocative weirdness of 'self-consciousness' – has been not only overlooked, but in some crucial way 'misapprehended' in favour of lesser order conceptual and phenomenological housekeeping. But the problem is we need to be sure what we're talking about if we're to make concrete progress in these unwelcoming and confusing metaphysical realms – unwelcoming in the sense that very few people want to go there, and those who dip their toes in tend to rely wholly on received philosophical ideas for navigation, rather than their own direct perceptions and apperceptions.

The natural scientific approach to consciousness is grounded on the idea that both mental and metaphysical apperceptions are insignificant in relation to objective material perceptions, and that experience itself can ultimately be satisfactorily explained (to the nth degree) by close study of the materially physical, and all this despite the unsettling provocations of quantum mechanics. And insofar as natural science continues to present the world at large with every more dazzling technology, the case for the objectively material as the 'last word in everything' can be seductive. So it might well appear to the incurious as if it is just a matter of time before scientists crack the 'hard problem' of consciousness once and for all.

But as we shall see, both scientists and philosophers are deploying naïve and misdirecting ideas for the implicit bases of their research, and this is invariably leading them to dead-ends and blind alleys, which they tend to explain either (in the case of scientists) by dismissing the very idea of metaphysics, or (in the case of philosophers) by indulging in impenetrable complexities. This is understandable, but unnecessary.

Consciousness=responsiveness

Some further important distinctions arising out of what we've established so far. We need now to explain the extent to which 'human consciousness' might differ from other kinds of consciousness, say that displayed by animals or perhaps insects. The word 'display' is crucial in behavioural terms here because we ascribe 'consciousness' or, if you prefer, 'awareness' to other creatures as a result of our observing/witnessing their responsiveness to their environments: there is no other way for us to do this, which means that, in the last resort, 'consciousness' – as we perceive its presence in others – is entirely a behavioural phenomenon, and entirely a behavioural ascription.

In other words, we have to observe certain behaviours in others before we are triggered to ascribe consciousness to them. Of course we can be mistaken, and attribute consciousness to something mechanical or inanimate, but this does not change the basic elemental circumstance in which we are led to believe consciousness to be present: we need first to observe it.

So what observational event – in its simplest terms - might trigger this belief in us? Basically something along the lines of an immediate responsiveness to circumstances in their environment; our witnessing of an appropriate (timely) responsiveness or receptiveness to changes (or events) in environmental circumstances would likely lead us to believe that the object (whatever it might be, organic or inorganic or mechanical) is, in some operational way, 'conscious': there is no more to any elemental encounter with 'consciousness' than that.

This of course has nothing to do – at this stage – with any kind of ascription of 'self-consciousness', or of other varieties of what we might term 'states of mind': we are simply limiting ourselves to the most basic and elemental perception of what we might term the 'presence of consciousness' in something external to us; an object we might encounter somewhere. And in these terms, 'consciousness' is nothing more than a perception of an elemental responsiveness, by an object, to changes or events in their immediate environment. Consciousness = responsiveness.

As we have seen earlier, consciousness and awareness and capacities for responsiveness exist on a continuum, from the most basic physical to the most subtle ethereal. So the question of reflexive self-consciousness really only occurs in a context very far removed from something basically physical, and it occurs ordinarily in a context understood to be characteristically human. Once again, the presence of something like reflexive self-consciousness in others is (for ourselves as self-reflexive subjects) a behavioural matter, and depends very much on how we judge the capacities of others in our interactions with them.

Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and consciousness

Given the current advances in artificial intelligence (AI) we can confidently declare – even at this stage – that, depending on the sophistication of the demands of the interacting human subject, it will not be difficult to have the vast majority of human beings, now and in the future, believe that they are interacting with other beings of a similar (or better) capacity to themselves, and to ascribe to these mechanisms all the capacities that they believe themselves to possess. The problem-solving and calculative intellect is easy to replicate; as are the emotional and imaginative capacities; the reflective and philosophical capacities are harder, but given that most people are content with received ideas, most people will be content with a mechanised capacity that can present them with responsively tailored versions of such ideas.

But have we yet solved the 'problem of consciousness', as generally understood in philosophical and scientific circles? Philosophically, the 'hard problem' of consciousness can be boiled down to the relatively simple – but impossibly absurdist – attempt to reconcile two irreconcilable concepts; namely the 'non-mental physical' with the 'non-physical mental': these are categorical distinctions which don't allow for their merging with one another as they are both (philosophically and scientifically) principial conceptions and are not reducible – without breaching the laws of logic and rationality - to something simpler. Yes there are many theoreticians who try to try to deploy conceptual sleight of hand to show that there are ways to do this, but this should simply be seen for the delusional nonsense it is.

The peculiarity of reflexive self-consciousness

But is this silly ongoing 'categorical confusion' really the 'hard problem' of consciousness which demands to be resolved? In fact, no: the genuinely 'hard problem' is best to be understood through a phenomenon we identified earlier, that of the weird sense of experiential dislocation that tends to occur when we explore – at length - our own sense of turning in on ourselves in attentive awareness, irrespective of what we might be thinking about. When we turn our awareness of thought in on itself, reflexively, it's as if existence itself is unknown to itself and even surprised at itself, and at that moment all of experience, from the highest to the lowest, is mysteriously called into question. More perplexing still is the sense that, whatever we might come up with as a potential answer to the experiential predicament of 'what on earth is this all about?', nothing is going to be good enough to put the question to rest.

So this weird sense of reflexive-self-mystification, always experienced as an intimate encounter with the essence of 'the mysterious' itself, appears to defy convincing explanation (and conceptual tidying up), while also appearing to be grotesquely misappropriated by both science and philosophy; in science not wanting to take it seriously, and in philosophy believing it to be comfortably located within the type of conscious /responsiveness identified earlier. But self-reflexive's essential experiential weirdness refuses to excuse itself from provoking us, and has the habit of constantly reappearing under the guise of unforeseen perplexity (vide quantum mechanics) in which sequential reasoning collapses into paradoxicality alongside the conceptually and logically bizarre.

Yet hidden behind all this apperceptual exploration and conceptual (good) housekeeping are a number of further implications (and observations) which radically undercut much – if not all – that has been presented thus far.

Let's have a go:

The widely-held naïve assumption – 'naïve' in the sense of 'unexamined' and 'seemingly self-evident' – is that an elemental conscious awareness is an ontological necessity in any kind of human experiencing, such that for experience – as an open-ended, ongoing ontological capacity – to take place, it presupposes something like a conscious underpinning to grant its very possibility.

Ontological priority

Well, there are at least two crucial features to this line of thinking, and both – for anyone the least interested in metaphysical ontology - are well worth examining. Firstly, regarding the matter of ontological priority; and secondly, the matter of sequential thought, or logical reasoning.

Ontological priority: when we employ the concept 'ontological priority', what are we driving at? Ultimately the idea of there being a 'something' which is both a necessity, as well as a 'that' which it would not be meaningfully possible to undermine without undercutting the very concept of priority; with the obvious consequence that should something be able to undermine any previous priority, that something would inevitably present itself as the 'new' priority. In other words, whatever can be shown to undercut a supposedly existing 'priority' must reasonably then itself automatically become ontologically prior. This is logical reasoning as basic as it gets.

So we have a 'that which necessarily must exist' for there to be anything in the first place, alongside the idea that this necessity is as far as one can go – in observational terms – at reaching what might be termed the absolute ground of the presentation of anything at all, from the most trivial and elemental to the most extensive and infinite.

Now the default conception of 'ontological priority' normally drifts in the direction of something like 'consciousness', effectively inferring a 'conscious arena' wherein objects and perceptions are granted a kind of perceptibility; or in the case of continental philosophy, granted 'being'. This does not mean that what is referred to as consciousness is non-problematic; consciousness is even in some cases (physicalist theories) described as 'illusory' and 'epiphenomenal', meaning that some other substance or capacity supersedes (underpins) consciousness in terms of ontological priority.

Here again we return to the idea of consciousness as a 'hard problem', meaning that even if it is not granted ontological priority, it still seems to elude convincing capture by philosophical & scientific theory, and ends up being the subject of tortuous but doomed conceptual exercises in which categorical irreconcilables are supposedly 'cleverly' reconciled (they aren't).

All of this is skirting an ontologically more interesting observation – and one which bypasses conceptual speculation (and logical reasoning!) – and this centres on the matter of the very point at which ontological elements – from the most primordial to the least – are, as it were, apprehended as such, and then accorded status (ie meaning), whatever that status might be. In other words, for something (anything) to warrant characteristics of any kind – on a continuum from 'a dismissable nothingness' to 'a something of supreme importance' – that something has, in the first instance (and in the last!), to be apprehended as 'whatever it is', such that it can then reveal (as a consequence in time) its meaning as a perceptible or apprehensible item in the ongoing experience of experience.

The ontological priority of the apprehending capacity

This may sound trivial, but it couldn't be more important. For anything to be 'a something', it has to be 'noticed' – that is, picked up, or apprehended, or brought into itself as itself – by an apprehending capacity which then – and not before – allows it to reveal, or divulge, its meaning within a grander scheme of things, namely the ongoing experience of experience. The presentation comes first, and then the content of the presentation reveals itself; it is not possible for the content to come prior to its initial apprehension as the thing which it is. Of course the thing initially apprehended may go on to reveal itself as other than we first thought or perceived, but it always has to be 'itself as itself' as an apprehension to begin with.

This may sound very peculiar, in that ordinarily we believe ordinary experience to be a seamless affair which does not consist of discrete moments somehow spliced together seamlessly; we think of experience as a seamless immersive, though this sense of 'seamlessness' is itself no more (or less) than a compelling (and widespread) apprehending of one angle (and not the only one) on the nature of experience as experienced. This is not then to describe the apparent seamlessness of experience as illusory or as an illusion, but merely to point out that experience has many diverse aspects to it, none of which can claim to be more than 'seemingly' dominant at any one time.

A simple experiment: ask yourself 'What is my next thought going to be?' Take a look, and then identify the thought to yourself. Reflecting back on the process, you will see that there is a pause in your experience (not necessarily in your wider experiencing per se) in which you take

a look at that 'realm' (or point in the mind's eye) where your thoughts appear and, in watching it, wait expectantly for the next thought to appear. When it does, you hold it in your attention until such time as it begins to reveal its content; in simple terms, this is the process of 'apprehending' – there is no other way of knowing what your thoughts are other than by apprehending them, meaning simply waiting for them to be presented to you in graspable form.

Of course this is not normally how we think about thinking; thoughts just seem to appear out of nowhere and ordinarily we give no mind to the process, considering it another angle on the apparent experiential seamlessness (mentioned earlier). But if we care to scrutinise our mental and physical perceptual processes, we can easily see that they follow a pattern of something (could be anything) grasped (apprehended/ attended to) in the first instance, with the content of the apprehension following closely behind, even if apparently instantaneously. We can't know or perceive anything if we don't apprehend it in the first place.

This is not a doctrine of experience by decree; this is how we actually grasp – and attend to – physical and mental perceptions. And it does not matter if we conceive of this actively or passively, ie whether we grasp stuff by force of will, or whether it is presented to us despite ourselves. (Once again, our sense of experience as something we either actively participate in or have passively imposed on us, are aspects of specific apprehendings.)

Ontological priority cannot be ascribed to second-order identifications

So what does all this mean? Simply that ontological priority cannot be ascribed to any particular (specific) apprehended perception, because that perception (whether physical or mental) is entirely dependent, both for its capture (that is, its 'being grasped') and for its secondary (meaningful) content, not on something which has clearly 'already been grasped' and then identified (ie 'consciousness') - and perhaps later conceptualised - but rather on the grasping (presentational) capacity itself. This 'grasping capacity' is – in terms of features we might ascribe to it – (almost) entirely invisible, in the same way as that which 'thinks thoughts' is invisible – we know we have thoughts, but that which allows us to 'know that' is itself invisible – we only know of its capacity by implication. We can sort of imagine or picture a nebulous substance called 'thought stuff' but it doesn't bear further scrutiny.

Where, then, have we arrived? At the amazing fact that 'identifiables' – perceptions noticed and then attended to in something like a 'lucid awareness' – are not, and can never be – ontologically primary or primordial, because their 'beinghood' (however we might want to define it, or refer to it) is not grounded in a hypothesised elemental and pervasive substance like 'consciousness', but rather in a (nebulous) 'capacity for apprehending'; itself invisible, but clearly implicated in its ongoing ability to present experiential items for observational attention and significance.

Further – and equally importantly – something like 'consciousness', as a conceptualised/ hypothesised 'something' in readiness of an identifiable phenomenon to attach itself to (or act as a label of), is, at the moment of identification, clearly ontologically secondary insofar as it is dependent on that capacity which presents and grasps and identifies its features in the first place. In other words, if we can identify 'a something' which appears to warrant the label 'consciousness', then we are already in a second-order phenomenal realm, unavoidably grounded in the apprehending capacity which has given it its being to begin with. This is not

semantics: this is how the experience of experience actually works at an ontologically primary level.

Can we push all this theorising to its furthest extreme? Meaning, can we reduce what we have to the simplest possible elements, such that we might clearly see where our descriptions are faulty and our reasoning wrong? We could start from the premise that we have misidentified each and every phenomenon, alongside breaking the rules of logic and rationality along the way; perhaps, but can we then dismiss the supposed 'actuality' of an apprehending/grasping/identifying capacity? What is it we are going to use to 'present' the elements of misidentified 'whatever' to a logically inept and mistaken 'whoever'?

We could try another line of reasoning: we could propose, by theoretical and conceptual decree, that there is a phenomenon called 'consciousness' – something along the (semi-circular) lines described earlier in this article; a free-standing nexus of attention and awareness, etc – in which all experiential phenomena take place, and which then can be said – once again by decree – to be the ultimate substance in ontological terms, and therefore the appropriate subject of philosophical and scientific investigation and debate. And this is exactly the situation philosophy and science finds itself right now, meaning that unless we can progress beyond 'consciousness' as an unexamined and dogmatically posited primordial 'given', consciousness is likely to remain a source of intractable confusion.

Summary:

'Consciousness' - loosely defined as lucid awareness or active knowingness – is not ontologically primordial; it is a second-order phenomenon dependent for its actual experientiality on that capacity which can both present, identify and then divulge its features. For consciousness to be identified as anything at all, it has first to be 'apprehended' in some way, and the capacity which enables and permits that is obviously ontologically primary.

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