

Individual Consciousness: An Argument for the Numerical Identity of All Conscious Existence

Abstract

If there is a plurality of absolutely separate individual conscious existences, corresponding to individual living organisms, then the directly experienced fact that only a particular one of these consciousnesses, one's own, stands out as immediately present, can not be true absolutely, but only relative to some specific context of conditions and qualifications singling out that particular consciousness. But further consideration demonstrates that it is not possible for any such context to be specified. This implies that all conscious existences must ultimately be united as, or in, some single conscious entity underlying the apparent plurality of individuals.

All of my conscious experience reflects the perspective of one particular living organism. The body of this organism, continually the same one, is constantly embedded at the centre of my perception, amidst a varying configuration of other perceived objects, thus defining my location within the world. The findings of neuroscience suggest that specific conditions and events within this body, especially within its brain, can be precisely correlated with every aspect and detail of my conscious experience.

The existence of many other living bodies, with behaviour and properties similar to those of my body, suggests the existence of many other consciousnesses, correlated with and centred on these other bodies. But whatever other consciousnesses may exist, whether correlated with living bodies or not, it is evident that one particular consciousness, centred on one particular body, stands out as the only one immediately present, here and now, manifest, to hand, directly experienced as me, or mine.

But surely *every* fully existent consciousness must likewise, by definition, be experienced as immediately present, singled out as the one which is me or mine. If there is a plurality of such consciousnesses, how is it possible for each separate consciousness both to be the one singled out as immediately present, and *not* to be the one singled out as immediately present?

If there is really a plurality of consciousnesses, then the statement "only this one particular consciousness is immediately present" can be true, not absolutely and categorically, but only *subject, or in relation, to some particular context* of conditions and qualifications singling out the one particular consciousness. What could this context conceivably be? It is not satisfactory to say that the statement is true only if uttered, or thought, by the individual whose consciousness it refers to: if there is actually a plurality of immediately present consciousnesses then it is false to say there is only one, no matter who says it. Nor is it satisfactory to say that the particular consciousness is the only one "immediately present to me"; because, if the phrases "immediately present" and "me/mine" are taken to refer to one and the same quality (of being directly manifest, to hand, here and now), then the phrase "immediately present to me" is a tautology, and again it would be false to say there is only one such consciousness if in fact there is a plurality. Nor is it satisfactory to regard the phrase "to me" as a qualification of "immediately present", as if there were different types or qualities of immediate presence, each specific to a different conscious individual. Possession of immediate presence, in the sense of "being directly manifest, to hand, here and now", seems to be an adequate criterion for recognising a fully existent consciousness;

but in order to function as a criterion, immediate presence has to be regarded as a predefined, identical quality with respect to which any given entity may be judged. Even if different types of immediate presence were possible, the original problem of specifying the context for experiencing a particular one of these would still remain. Alternatively, "me" might be understood as referring to some entity conceptually separable from the consciousness itself: for example, the body, or some kind of "ego" or "soul" experiencing the consciousness; but if this separate "me" entity is not the only one of its kind, then the same problem of specifying a context singling out a particular individual from the plurality of such entities again arises. Similar difficulties occur if the particular consciousness is said to be immediately present "only if *one is* this consciousness"; since, either the phrase "one is" is synonymous with "is immediately present", or else "one" refers to an entity or property singled out in some unspecified context from a plurality. It is also, I think, not satisfactory to say that each consciousness intrinsically defines or indicates its own context, through being the only one immediately present to itself, or in relation to some part or referent of itself, such as its central brain/body entity, or some particular sequence of experience. If there is actually a plurality of consciousnesses, then the statement "only this particular consciousness is immediately present to itself" is false, since each of the several consciousnesses is immediately present to itself. The statement "only this particular consciousness is immediately present centred on this particular brain/body entity, or having this particular sequence of experience" may be true; but if there is a plurality of immediately present consciousnesses, associated with different sequences of experience and/or brain/body entities, then the question arises: what is the context in which the consciousness associated with this particular sequence of experience, or this particular brain/body entity, out of the pluralities that exist, is singled out as the consciousness being experienced as immediately present? This amounts to the same as the original question: what is the context in which this particular consciousness is singled out as the only one immediately present? The attempt to address the question by describing the context in terms of the consciousness has thus led to the true but unsatisfying answer, that "only this consciousness is immediately present when this particular brain/body entity, or sequence of experience, is immediately present". In fact, every attempted way of specifying the context will fail to provide a satisfactory answer, since there will always be a plurality of analogous contexts, each corresponding to a different consciousness, with each of these consciousness-context structures having to be conceived both as being, and not being, the one singled out as identifying the one particular consciousness being experienced as immediately present. The original question will therefore arise again in the form: what is the further context within which one particular consciousness-context structure is singled out, from the plurality of such structures, as the one underlying the immediately present experience? In effect, every attempt to specify the required context will achieve no more than a fuller description, either broader or more detailed, of the phenomenon for which the context is required, and thus will fail to get any nearer to an adequate account of the context itself.

If the co-existence of a plurality of consciousnesses, each experienced as the only one immediately present, is not a coherently describable state of affairs, even with each consciousness referred to a uniquely corresponding context, this would indicate that at least one of the following two statements is false: "each consciousness is experienced as the only one immediately present", or "there is a plurality of co-existing consciousnesses". The first of these statements seems undeniably true, even a matter of definition. If the second statement is false, this could be because there is not a plurality of consciousnesses, or because the consciousnesses are not co-existent; that is, they exist only *one at a time*. In the latter case, if the consciousnesses are really absolutely separate (a true plurality or disjunction, comprising only mutually exclusive individuals), then the original problem arises once again: how to specify the context within which a particular one of these disjunct consciousnesses is singled out as the only one ever to be

experienced as immediately present. If the consciousnesses are not absolutely separate, then they are ultimately united as, or in, some single entity underlying the plurality. The plurality would be of self-contained sequences of experience, all belonging to, or constituting, a single conscious entity, the only one of its kind. The immediately present experience would always belong to the single underlying consciousness, and may be imagined as belonging to each of the plurality of sequences of experience, not simultaneously, but one at a time, as if successively. This is similar, or at least analogous, to the way a person's present experience belongs in turn to each of a plurality of successive days, especially if the person is partly amnesic and does not remember experiencing previous days, nor perceive the continuity between adjacent days.