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Symposium

Conscious Belief

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Abstract Tim Crane maintains that beliefs cannot be conscious because they persist in the absence of consciousness. Conscious judgments can share their contents with beliefs, and their occurrence can be evidence for what one believes; but they cannot *be* beliefs, because they don't persist. I challenge Crane's premise that belief attributions to the temporarily unconscious are literally true. To say of an unconscious agent that she believes that p is like saying that she sings well. To say she sings well is to say that when she sings, her singing is good. To say that she believes that p is (roughly) to say that when she consciously considers the content that p she consciously affirms (believes) it. I also argue that the phenomenal view of intentional content Crane appears to endorse *prima facie* commits him to the view, at least controversial, perhaps incoherent, that there is unconscious phenomenology (the intentional contents of unconscious beliefs).
KEYWORDS: Belief; Consciousness; Unconscious; Intentional Content; Judgment

Riassunto *Credenze coscienti* – Tim Crane sostiene che le credenze non possano essere coscienti, dal momento che perdurano anche in assenza di coscienza. I giudizi formulati consapevolmente possono condividere i loro contenuti con le credenze e il loro verificarsi può essere una forma di evidenza a supporto di quanto uno crede. E tuttavia essi non possono *essere* credenze, dal momento che non perdurano. Nel commento metto in discussione la premessa di Crane secondo cui porre l'attribuzione di credenze su un piano temporaneamente inconscio sia vero in senso letterale. Dire di un agente non cosciente che esso creda che p è come dire che canti bene. Dire che canti bene è dire che quando canta, il suo canto è buono. Dire che crede che p è (in senso lato) dire che quando considera consapevolmente il contenuto p costui lo afferma consapevolmente (lo crede). Inoltre intendo affermare che la visione fenomenica del contenuto intenzionale che Crane sembra abbracciare lo impegni *prima facie* nei confronti della prospettiva, quantomeno controversa e probabilmente incoerente, secondo cui esisterebbe una dimensione fenomenica inconscia (ossia esisterebbero contenuti intenzionali di credenze inconsce).
PAROLE CHIAVE: Credenza; Coscienza; Inconscio; Contenuto intenzionale; Giudizio

TIM CRANE'S *ASPECTS OF PSYCHOLOGISM* is rich with insight and argument. It treats a number of related topics in philosophy of mind with Crane's accustomed creativity, clarity and rigor. The essays collected here develop Crane's approach to the philosophy of

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mind, which stands in contrast to the past fifty years of theorizing in analytic philosophy. Crane argues, and I heartily agree, that we should not center philosophical investigation of mentality on the analysis of discourse about it (e.g., the semantics of propositional attitude ascriptions), or limit it to commentary on empirical psychology. We must confront mental reality directly. And this must involve both taking phenomenal consciousness seriously and applying direct introspective methods to its study. Conceptual analysis and empirical psychology are of course important; but we must not ignore the phenomenon itself, or our uniquely intimate perspective on it.

There is more than enough material in this beautifully written book to fund a rewarding career in Crane commentary. I will limit myself, however, to taking issue with Crane's thesis, developed in essay thirteen (*Unconscious Belief and Conscious Thought*), that beliefs cannot be conscious. I have doubts that Crane's arguments are sufficient to establish this claim. In particular, I think the *aptness* of attributions of enduring mental states does not entail their literal *truth*. Moreover, there is a troubling *prima facie* incompatibility between the thesis and a view about the constitution of intentional (thought) content that Crane is (at least) tempted by – and which in my view is arguably correct. It seems to me that, quite to the contrary, this view of content (probably) entails that beliefs cannot be *un*conscious.

Beliefs (and other propositional attitudes) have received philosophical attention primarily as states that figure in the rationalization (causation and explanation) of behavior. This does not exhaust their nature, however, since we may believe things that we do not, or even cannot, profess or act upon. Beliefs can be reasons for acting, but they can also feature in purely mental activity, such as reasoning, speculation, reflection, etc. On Crane's view, «the essence of belief is that it is *taking something to be the case*», or «accepting or endorsing [a propositional] content».[1] And this seems to me to be perfectly true.

Propositional contents themselves (the *somethings* one takes to be the case), as mentally represented,[2] are *thoughts*. A thought – a thinking that *p* – is not *per se* a belief. Thoughts can occur entirely non-committally. One can think that *p* without wishing, hoping, praying, planning, dreaming, etc. that *p*. Thoughts are mere *entertainings*, mere *representings*, of propositional contents. To *believe* that *p* is to think that *p* while taking *p* to be the case – while accepting or endorsing that *p*. Again I find myself in complete agreement.

One can, however, *consciously* think that *p* while *consciously* endorsing it. And it seems natural enough to take such conscious endorsement of the content that *p* to be conscious belief. But Crane denies this. He claims that such episodes are *conscious judgments* that *p*, but that they cannot be *beliefs* that *p*. Why does he think this? He writes:

> It cannot be right to say that the very same belief *state* is both conscious and unconscious, if "conscious belief" is understood as occurrent belief. What must be meant (at least) by saying that a conscious belief is the same as an unconscious belief is that it has the same *content*: these are states in which you believe the same thing.[3]

If he means that a *token* belief state cannot be both conscious and unconscious, *simultaneously*, then he is surely right. But he also says that an occurrent belief cannot be the *very same thing* as a dispositional belief, any more than a breaking can be an instance of fragility.[4]

So it seems what he means is that a conscious belief and an unconscious belief cannot be the same because an unconscious belief is a *dispositional state*, while a conscious one is an *occurrence*.

It is not clear to me that there cannot be unconscious occurrences of states that can also occur consciously – so that an unconscious belief and a conscious belief would be, aside from the difference in consciousness, type identical. They would be propositional attitudes of the same type with the same content. I do not see that what Crane says rules this out.

However, he goes on to argue that it is *also* of the essence of belief that it *persist* – past the moment of its acquisition, and through episodes of complete unconsciousness:

> When a belief is formed, by perception or other means [including conscious judgment, see p. 277 – DP], it can be stored in the organism's mind and then can be put at the service of the organism's projects in various ways – either by guiding action, by being used in reasoning and or by being used in planning. For beliefs to play this functional role, they must continue to exist – that is, persist – beyond the moment of their acquisition.[5]

Consciously endorsed occurrent conscious thoughts, obviously, cannot so persist. So they lack an essential feature of beliefs. So we may conclude that the unconscious beliefs Crane says can't be type-identical to any conscious state are unconscious non-occurrent ones – those that can persist in the absence of any occurrent mental activity. It is this feature of belief that, Crane argues, entails that beliefs cannot be conscious states.

In addition to creating belief, conscious endorsement of a content can *reveal to one* what one's previously acquired belief is, or allow one to *deliberate* about what one believes. But such *bringing to consciousness* of what one believes does not count as making one's belief conscious.

Beliefs are *manifested* in consciousness through the conscious occurrence of thoughts sharing their contents, though they do not thereby themselves *become* conscious. Nor are they *copies* of stored beliefs:

> what does it mean to "bring" a state to phenomenal consciousness? One answer is clear: it is *not* to create another, conscious, version of the state itself. What is brought to mind when reflecting consciously on one's beliefs is not itself another belief. My claim is that what is brought to mind is, rather, a conscious *thought*. [6]

Thus one may come to know *what* one believes in being aware of the content-matching conscious occurrent belief, and *that* one believes it by consciously endorsing its content.

I am a bit puzzled by the first part of the quoted passage from page 271. When a belief is formed by perception or conscious judgment, it is *consciously* formed. But then is the belief, upon its formation, not conscious? What is it for *it* – the consciously formed belief which is not yet in storage – to be stored? This cannot be taken literally if it is to be consistent with Crane's overall view, since storage implies persistence through unconsciousness, and conscious states do not so persist. So what he must mean is that an enduring acceptance-state sharing its content and attitudinal component is created along with the formation of the conscious.

But what if no such state is created? What if I consciously endorse the thought that *p* and then immediately forget that I did, and form no memory of the acceptance of it? Or quickly change my mind? Why should this not be a temporary conscious belief – especially if it shares the functional role characteristic of belief? If I consciously endorse it and act upon it, why should I not be believing it? Why can't there be temporary, non-persisting beliefs? («For a moment there, I believed that Trump might be a serious candidate. Fortunately, I came to my senses»). Beliefs *can be* stored for future use; but what is the argument that they *must be* stored?

The important question for Crane, however, is what beliefs must be like given that they *can* be stored and persist through mental inactivity. And his argument is that since conscious judgments are *occurrent* they cannot be stored in the way beliefs are; hence, conscious judgments cannot be beliefs. Judgments cannot persist the way beliefs do because they are *events*, while beliefs are *states*, and events and states are of fundamentally different metaphysical categories. To be in a state is to instantiate a property, and, Crane argues, it makes no sense to talk of states having temporal parts (the way events do):

> My having the height I do is a state of me; it makes no sense to talk about the earlier part or the later part of my having the height I do.[7]

Though *my being in that state* can persist over time – I can be 4 feet tall for 6 months – the state itself is just the instantiation of the property. My *being in that state* – the continued instantiation of that property for 6 months – is an event, and so can have temporal parts. But my being in the state is not the same as the state.

It does seem correct to say that a judgment cannot be a lasting state. It seems I could no more judge that *p* for 6 months than I could *say* that *p* for six months. I could judge or say that *p* again and again for 6 months, but that would be just to make the judgment or statement over and over.[8]

But I wonder, then, how it can be that belief is essentially a *taking-to-be* or *accepting* or *endorsement*, if these are events (*occurrences* – mental *acts*), and as such, by Crane's metaphysical lights, cannot persist the way belief does. What could it be to persistently instantiate the property of endorsing that *p*, if endorsement is an event? To *repeatedly* instantiate it? This hardly seems plausible.

Crane distinguishes three types of conscious judgment;[9] but he does not say anything in this paper about *un*conscious judgment. Perhaps he would not agree that there is such a thing. Perhaps he would claim that taking-to-be-the-case, endorsing and accepting are not forms of judgment – or that there are other forms that are not episodic. Perhaps there is an unconscious analogue of judgment – maybe some kind of functional state. On such an account unconscious judgment would dispositional, since, clearly, one does not always act upon everything one believes. And this would fit nicely with Crane's thesis that beliefs themselves are dispositional states: beliefs are dispositions to make positive conscious judgments (as well as to behave in certain ways in certain circumstances?).

This brings me to my main objections to Crane's view. He supports his claim that beliefs (can?) survive the absence of consciousness with the intuition that there's something very wrong with saying that an individual ceases to believe what he believes when he ceases to consciously endorse it. This intuition is quite strong. I think one needs a very good reason to reject it. I think I have one.

It seems to me that when one says of a dreamless sleeper that she believes that Viktor Orbán wants to rule the world, what one says is like what one would say if one said that she sings well, or has a good voice. Neither of these requires that we take singing or having a good voice themselves to be dispositional states. Rather, when we say of the silent sleeper that she sings well, what we are saying is that, though she is not now singing, when she does she is good at it. What she retains while not singing is the disposition to sing well. And the same should be said, I think, of belief. The dreamless sleeper is not actually in the state of believing that Viktor Orbán wants to rule the world; she is in the state of being disposed so to believe.

Having a persisting belief in your brain is like having a photograph on the hard drive of your computer. There are not really any photographs in your computer. (Look closely; you will not see any.) What there are are dispositions to (re)produce photographs (on the computer screen, on printer paper, or whatever).

We make many acceptable ostensibly categorical claims about individuals which should be taken to be ascriptions of dispositions to be in states rather than ascriptions of being in those states. The dreamless sleeper may be truly said to be a dazzling conversationalist, or to have a Liverpool accent, or to be writing a novel, when she could not be said to be with conversing or speaking or writing. Though these claims may truly be made when the subject is in fact doing the things mentioned, they may also be used to make *merely* dispositional claims.

There is a difference between being disposed to believe what one has already consciously accepted and being disposed to be-

lieve what one had never considered. And this might allow for a stronger sense in which the dreamless sleeper may be said to believe what she affirmed while awake. For in this case one's evidence for the attribution is not a general fact about what people are in general likely to affirm once it is put to them, but rather a specific fact about what has been affirmed by a given individual (together with the supposition that there is no reason to suspect that she has changed her mind).

Thus, I do not think it can be inferred from the aptness of the claim that the dreamless sleeper believes that Viktor Orbán wants to rule the world that she is right then, at the time of attribution, in a state that *is* the belief that Viktor Orbán wants to rule the world. The aptness-maker in this case is a disposition to be in a belief state. It is, at that moment, no more *literally* true that she believes this of Orbán than that there are pictures of her visit to Estonia in her turned-off computer.

And this leads me to my second major worry about Crane's view. There are no pictures on hard drives because none of their states (whether the computer is on or off) have *photographic content* – by which I mean the colors, shapes, etc. that (at least in part) determine what a picture is *of*. At best there are coded instructions for producing things that have photographic content. And something exactly analogous holds of states of the non-experiencing brain: they cannot have phenomenal content. Crane is well aware of this:

> If phenomenal character is the character of phenomenal episodes, and these are episodes in the stream of consciousness, beliefs can *never* have phenomenal character. But thoughts – in the sense characterized in §4 above – do have phenomenal character, since they are episodes in the stream of consciousness.[10]

But this creates a serious potential problem for him. Though he does not commit himself to it in this paper, Crane seems sympathetic to the thesis that «conscious thoughts have a phenomenal intentionality to call their own».[11] However, he clearly cannot hold this consistently with holding that the contents of conscious thoughts are identical to the contents of (unconscious, dispositional) beliefs. Unconscious dispositions are not experiences, and so cannot have phenomenal properties. So belief contents on his view cannot be phenomenally constituted.

Crane seems faced with the following choice: either give up the phenomenal intentionality of thought thesis, give up the thesis that beliefs and conscious thoughts can have the same content, or give up the thesis that beliefs are unconscious dispositional states.

In my view, there are very good reasons to think that thought content is phenomenally constituted.[12] And it does not seem at all advisable to deny that thoughts and beliefs can have the same intentional contents. So, my advice would be to give up the thesis that beliefs cannot be conscious, and accept that (unless there can be unconscious occurrent states with phenomenal character),[13] on the contrary, beliefs cannot be *un*conscious. What persists in the absence of occurrent mental activity is not beliefs, but dispositions to believe. Believing is essentially an occurrent, experiential phenomenon.

Notes

[1] T. CRANE, *Aspects of Psychologism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2014, pp. 270-271.
[2] I would argue that propositional contents are mentally *instantiated*. See D. PITT, *Intentional Psychologism*, in: «Philosophical Studies», vol. CXLVI, n. 1, 2009, pp. 117-138.
[3] T. CRANE, *Aspects of Psychologism*, cit., p. 270.
[4] *Ibidem*.
[5] *Ivi*, p. 271.
[6] *Ivi*, p. 276.
[7] *Ivi*, p. 275.
[8] Though perhaps one could be in the (no doubt fatally boring) state of constantly judging that *p* for six months?
[9] See T. CRANE, *Aspects of Psychologism*, cit., p. 277.
[10] *Ivi*, p. 279.
[11] *Ivi*, p. 280.

[12] See D. PITT, *Introspection, Phenomenality and the Availability of Intentional Content*, in: T. BAYNE, M. MONTAGUE (eds.), *Cognitive Phenomenology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 141-173; D. PITT, *Intentional Psychologism*, cit.; D. PITT, *The Phenomenology of Cognition, or, What Is It Like to Think That P?*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», vol. LXIX, n. 1, 2004, pp. 1-36.

[13] I wrestle with this question in D. PITT, *The Quality of Thought*, chapter 5 (forthcoming).