



Acts of Consciousness

A Social Psychology Standpoint

GUY SAUNDERS



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Acts of Consciousness

Drawing on compelling material from research interviews with former hostages and political prisoners, Guy Saunders reworks three classic thought experiment stories: Parfit's 'Teleporter', Nagel's 'What is it like to be a bat?' and Jackson's 'Mary the colour scientist' to form a fresh look at the study of consciousness. By examining consciousness from a social psychology perspective, Saunders develops a 'Cubist Psychology of consciousness' through which he challenges the accepted wisdom of mainstream approaches by arguing that people can act freely. What makes 'Cubist Psychology' is both the many examples taken from different viewpoints and the multiple ways of looking at the key issues of person, mind and world. This is a unique and engaging book that will appeal to students and academics in the field of consciousness studies and other readers with an interest in consciousness.

GUY SAUNDERS is a senior lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of the West of England, Bristol, where he teaches courses on 'Psychology of Consciousness' and 'Psychology and the Arts'.

Preface

This book is about how we come to be a person, how we develop a mind of our own and how we come to have an impact on the lives of others through the acts of consciousness we make in the world about us. I want to engage you and I hope you might suspend belief and test your worldview against mine. I will write as plainly as I can about life and living and discuss the familiar, commonsensical and commonplace.

I will discuss three stories as a way of examining our basic beliefs about life and living. The three stories are written as 'thought experiments'. A *thought experiment* is an exercise in thinking about something we wish to investigate for which an actual experiment would be unethical and / or impossible to carry out with current technology. I'll take a fresh look at the stories from a different standpoint.

My focus will be on the familiar features of persons and places, such as minds, points of view and experiences, but with the emphasis on action. I'll take the root verbs – 'to be', 'to have' and 'to know' – and use these as a starting point for an investigation of consciousness and as headings for the three parts of this book.

I will draw on the accounts of former hostages and political prisoners and the research I carried out with their help. I think that the extreme situation of solitary confinement amplifies what it is to be human. Our everyday lives may be drowned out by the noise of normal life such that we are caught up in all manner of matters that take our attention. I'll systematically examine what happens to people in solitary confinement and apply understanding from this to the burning question: what's this life and living all about?

Preface

I offer this book as my contribution towards the field of consciousness studies. I will put a case *for* the standpoint I am taking rather than argue against other standpoints in the field. I'll refer you to other works I've read so that you can hear other voices on these matters. I'll add some notes on recommended further reading all of which I've further read myself.

I recommend reading this book from the beginning through to the end as an unfolding story, but it is structured to allow those who like to dip in to do so. The Introduction is essential but can be read in conjunction with any of the three parts of the book. There is a name and subject index so that you can find explanations of key terms.

I will be raising questions about how we conventionally think about consciousness both in common practice and in more specialist enquiries. I believe that the artist René Magritte was on the right track when he said he wanted to 'sabotage the familiar' and 'to put the real world on trial'.¹ I would put it less confrontationally: I want to suspend belief, to try out and to test out the familiar world of person and place, to explore the world about us, to ask what life and living is all about.

Care to join me?

Acknowledgements

Very many people have a voice in this book and some may go unacknowledged here. Much of what follows may have been picked up in one way or another from others: casual conversations, unattributed reading and the general social affairs of living that contribute to all of us. Where this book is good it is because of the help people gave me; where it is not, then it is down to me. In particular, I should like to thank John Hodgson, whose skilful editorial help – showing me how I could make my writing clearer – has made this book much more readable. I should like to thank Harriet Powney who also gave editorial help, particularly in the early stages of writing. My wife Frances read drafts and offered ideas that helped improve the clarity of this book. To all those who read drafts and offered encouragement: thank you.

Where I know sources, I have cited them. The sources cited may be the ones that set my thinking in train and need not be the original source of any particular argument. All errors are mine and I hope to address these and other matters as an ongoing process. I have included a list at the back of the book of those works that are the main influences and that I would recommend readers to follow up; this list includes some comments suggesting why I think it's worth taking the time to read, view or listen to some or all of the recommended works. There is a list of references to films, paintings and other artworks where I think these may help you understand the main themes. There are no illustrations, but you should easily find all the images you need online. There is also a simple bibliography of works that, even if not directly cited, form the main backdrop of scholarship.

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Many have helped me and the following have done more than their fair share. So, a big thank you to Vladimir Bukovsky, Brian Keenan, Terry Waite and Anthony Grey for their previous participation in interviews from which I derived much of my doctoral thesis (Saunders 1998) and for permission to quote material in this book. Thanks are also due to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) who funded the doctoral research work that led to my thesis on consciousness and captivity.

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and for writing the best introduction to consciousness book on the market. I would like to thank all the students who have taken my 'Consciousness' course, and particularly Duncan Gillard.

The lyrics from the song 'I wish I knew how it would feel to be free' are used by permission of Duane Music and © 1964 Duane Music Inc., USA assigned to Westminster Music Ltd, Suite 2.07, Plaza 535 King's Road, London SW10 0SZ. International copyright secured. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

I don't know about you, but I suppose you are a person like me; that you have thoughts and feelings and experiences as I do; that these are *your* experiences that you know about. And I would call these features *consciousness*. Consciousness is how it is for us to live this life of ours, so it is a person's subjective experience; it is *psychological*. Consciousness is about how we share our world and what we have in common one with another, so although it is *my* conscious experience or *your* conscious experience, it is also *our* conscious experience; it is a *social psychological* feature of people's lives. We do things in this shared world about us and these acts have an impact on our lives and the lives of others, so we live in a world of people and relationships. We may come to take responsibility for this because we not only know consciously what we do, we can also reflect beforehand on what we will do and its impact. Over time, we may commit to people and perhaps to ideas. We can know consciously and act freely.

I want to think through the implications of this interpretation of consciousness and ask what this means for us not as a final explanation, but as a way station that may help us make a start on some big issues: issues of how we treat one another and ourselves, and issues to do with those things we most take for granted. In a sense the very character of consciousness that I am setting out calls for reflection on our life and living.

I accept this is a very partial work: I am making a selection and dealing with this selectively. The idea is to take the space to go slowly over the research work I have carried out.

The research background: the genre of captivity

I wanted to research imagination but I couldn't think how to do it. While I was doing my degree in psychology in the 1990s I came across an account of solitary confinement written by Joseph Kovach, I believe.¹ The title was 'Freedom through mental activity' and in it the author described how he had survived his time as a political prisoner, in what was the Soviet Union, by his use of imagination. At once I could see how the research I wanted to do could be done. I would research the experiences of those who had been held in solitary confinement as a way of researching the use of imagination. And that is what I did.

At first it was imagination that was the focus, but as I worked I found that the wider field of consciousness added to my interest, and still does. Also, in the early stages the stories of captivity were the backdrop to help me understand imagination; but as I got interested in this extraordinary body of work, I found myself bringing captivity to the foreground of the research project.

Accounts of captivity are legion: the prison writings of former political prisoners and hostages that make up a body of work deserve to be called a 'genre'.² I read extensively from the genre of captivity and I wrote to former captives asking to meet them. I met and interviewed four former captives.

Two of the conclusions I drew from the research are relevant to this book. The first is that *we are made from the lives of others*. Consciousness is made from the social interactions made by others with us in early life and by the exchanges we make with others as we get older. In captivity, we make a virtual social world in order to sustain ourselves. I will say how I think this is done and how I think this has a bearing on the life we lead. The second is that *consciousness is polyphonic*. Consciousness consists in features running next to each other (as well as the more usual configuration of a continuous, sequential, one-after-another conscious mental life). By polyphonic, what is meant is that consciousness has many

things going on at the same time. The many things going on side by side simultaneously compose our acts of consciousness and conscience. Far from being a different kind of existence, captivity turns down the volume of ordinary life and living and serves to amplify our humanity. It is unsurprising that books written by former hostages and political prisoners are so successful. They speak to us about who and what we are.

Under conditions of solitary confinement where little or nothing is happening, everything rests on the psychological life of the captive, how they deal with their situation. And I came to see this situation as something that could stand in for conscious life and living because it pared down a person to all that there is when there is nothing else. When a person is separated from those they love and know, from everything they would normally do, and from the world of events, what is left is what a person is.

It may seem as if this is a topsy-turvy standpoint where I've turned things on their heads, but studying what something is *not* in order to study what something is has had other successes. In fact, studying things directly rarely works. I came to see how studying captivity was studying how we are free and that by studying a person in isolation I was studying what it was to be a person in relation to our world.

This book is a series of investigations about consciousness that takes apart the world about us and how it seems to us to be, and puts it back together again differently. I will be using three stories that have been much discussed in the field of consciousness studies as a means of investigation. The stories will allow me to discuss various features of consciousness such as subjective experience, point of view and knowing what we know.

I am a realist social psychologist who believes that the world about us really exists. I believe we contribute to the world about us that makes us who and what we are. I believe we are minded and capable of consciously knowing and acting with conscience. I believe we are persons in our own right. Persons are