

Stream of Consciousness

Unity and Continuity in Conscious Experience

Barry Dainton

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Stream of Consciousness

'This is one of the most interesting books in the philosophy of mind that I have read in recent years.... Dainton's discussion of our conscious experience of temporality and change is especially impressive. No philosopher interested in the nature of phenomenal consciousness can afford to ignore this book.'

E. J. Lowe, *University of Durham*

What is the basic architecture of consciousness? How are time and space manifest in conscious experience? Is consciousness really like a stream, as William James famously argued?

Although there has recently been a massive upsurge of interest in consciousness, most of this has been focused on the relationship between consciousness and the brain. This has meant that important and intriguing questions concerning the fundamental characteristics of consciousness itself have not received the attention they deserve. *Stream of Consciousness* is devoted to these questions, presenting a systematic, phenomenological inquiry into the most general features of conscious life: the nature of awareness, introspection, phenomenal space and time-consciousness.

Barry Dainton shows us that a stream of consciousness is not a mosaic of discrete fragments of experience, but rather an interconnected flowing whole. This is due to a single primitive experiential relationship which he calls 'co-consciousness', a relationship which holds between those experiences that are had together, both at a time and over time.

Stream of Consciousness will interest anyone concerned with the current debates on consciousness in philosophy, psychology and neuroscience.

Barry Dainton is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Liverpool.

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For my parents

Preface

But all my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness.

Hume

The principal aim of this book is to provide an account of the unity and continuity to be found within our streams of consciousness. Since I confine my attention to what occurs within experience, my approach is phenomenological: I try to describe and make sense of the experienced relationships between the contents of consciousness – items such perceptual experiences, thoughts, feelings, mental images and bodily sensations. Inevitably, in addressing these issues I will also be concerned with the general nature and structure of conscious awareness.

In talking of the ‘experienced relationship’ between the contents of consciousness I am not referring to anything mysterious or unfamiliar. To illustrate: look at your hand and snap your fingers. What happens? You see and feel a movement, and hear a sound. These three experiences – one auditory, one visual and one tactile – do not occur in isolation from one another, they occur together within your consciousness, you are aware of them all at once (along with a good deal else). Moreover, these experiences are not momentary, they each have some duration; you are aware not only of their duration but of the way each is preceded and followed by other experiences. Experiences that occur simultaneously can be experienced together, but so can experiences that occur successively.

The fact that experiences occur together in these ways is so obvious and familiar that it may not seem to give rise to any interesting or significant problems or puzzles. This changes as soon as one looks at the matter more closely. When you see and hear your finger move, just what is the relationship between the visual experience and the auditory experience? Are the auditory and visual contents separate from your awareness of them? If so, what is your awareness like in itself? Could these same contents exist independently of your awareness? Alternatively, perhaps these different contents are simply parts of a single complex experience, one which does not involve a separation of awareness and content. If so, what is the relationship

between these parts, what is it that binds them together? Does being connected in this way affect the character of the parts – would the visual component of your experience have been just the same if the auditory component had been absent? The sound and the movement seem to be located at roughly the same place. Does this mean consciousness is in some manner spatial? Given that we directly experience change, our awareness cannot be confined to a durationless present, but how can we be directly aware of what is in the past? What must consciousness be like if immediate experience encompasses a temporal interval?

Questions such as these are far from trivial. Space and time were long seen as jointly constituting a fixed arena which both contained and constrained all that exists and occurs; they were viewed as the frame of the world. But there is another framework, one we are more directly acquainted with, phenomenal rather than physical, but no less central to our lives: it consists of the sorts of space, time, unity and continuity to be found within our own experience, rather than between atoms, stars, tables and chairs. In investigating this framework we are probing some of the most general and basic features of conscious life.

While the topics I will be dealing with have not been ignored in recent years, they have not received a great deal of attention either. This is largely because many philosophers until recently assumed that consciousness could be ignored, explained away, or analysed in terms of something else. The climate has now changed and there is a widespread (though far from universal) acceptance that consciousness is not only real, but too important to ignore or explain away, and that attempts to reduce it to something quite different will not succeed (a view I share and assume to be true throughout, but will not try to defend). As a consequence of this climatic change, interest in consciousness has soared, and not only among philosophers: people working in fields such as psychology, biology, neuroscience and physics have taken an interest too, which has led to a burgeoning literature. However, comparatively little of this new work has been concerned with phenomenological issues; most of it has been devoted to the relationship between consciousness and the brain, or consciousness and the physical world. This is understandable, for as soon as experience is taken seriously – taken to be an irreducible ingredient of reality in its own right – the difficulty of understanding how anything material could generate experience becomes all too apparent, and long-neglected metaphysical options have to be taken seriously again: perhaps we are not wholly physical beings; perhaps our conception of the physical requires radical revision; perhaps the problem only seems so hard because of our cognitive limitations. But while the interest in these questions is legitimate and understandable, it is to some extent premature. To understand the relationship between consciousness and matter we need an understanding of the nature of both. That physicists are still some way from completing their business is well known, but there are fundamental questions about experience that are somewhat less well known,

and which have yet to be answered. As long as the matter-consciousness relationship remains problematic, the only way these questions can be answered is by inspecting consciousness itself, from the inside. Some of these questions, those concerning the ways experiences are interrelated within streams of consciousness, are the sole subject matter of this book.

A word of warning: although my approach is largely phenomenological, any reader looking for an introduction to the relevant views of the major figures of the classical phenomenological tradition will be disappointed. My interest in the stream of consciousness stemmed originally from an inquiry into the self and the problem of personal identity. Having come round to the view that a promising approach to the latter problem would focus on the ways capacities for conscious experience have to be related to belong to a single subject, I came to consider how experiences have to be related in order to constitute a stream of consciousness, and at this point, not previously having given the question much thought, I embarked on exploratory forays into the phenomenological literature. I found stimulation and obscurity in roughly equal measure; one thing I did not find were satisfactory answers to the questions I brought with me. Consequently, although borrowing from other writers (of whatever tradition) whenever possible, I have at times found myself obliged to carve out a path of my own. This said, my engagement with the phenomenological literature did not leave me entirely unscathed. There is a discussion of Husserl's views on time-consciousness in Chapter 6, and my treatment of introspective awareness in Chapter 2 was influenced by Brentano and Sartre; the alert reader will detect occasional echoes of Heidegger. My interest in the relationship between experiential wholes and their parts was to some degree provoked by one of Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, certain doctrines of the gestalt psychologists, and passages to be found in that great source of phenomenological insights and descriptions, James' *Principles of Psychology*.

Sadly, the list of neglected topics does not end here. Apart from one brief detour, I have made no mention of the voluminous Eastern writings on the ways consciousness can be transformed by meditative practices, and I have made no mention at all of the various writings devoted to the consequences of ingesting hallucinogens. Nor have I taken much account of the neurological data about the fascinating effects brain disorders can have on experience. But while a fuller and better treatment would no doubt incorporate material from all of these sources, there is something to be said for trying to achieve a clear picture of typical streams of consciousness, of the sort most of us have for most of the time. This is what I have tried to provide, although even within this constraint I have further narrowed the focus. In restricting my attention to the most general features of experience, I have made no attempt to do justice to its variety and richness, and so to this extent plead guilty to the charge of ignoring everything that makes human life interesting and distinctive. Most of what I have to say would probably apply to far more primitive creatures, incapable of conceptual

thought and moral or aesthetic responses, creatures who can only enjoy the simplest forms of sensory experience. But only if the experiences of these creatures unfold within the same framework of unity and continuity as our own experience, in all its richness and complexity. And as I have already suggested, though familiar, this framework poses problems aplenty.

Whatever errors and infelicities remain in what follows, there would have been more were it not for the assistance I have received from others. My thanks to: John Foster, for invaluable guidance and encouragement when I first started thinking about these questions; Nicholas Nathan, for both his enthusiastic support and his determined attempts to make me aware of the inadequacies of my position; Howard Robinson, for helpful advice on a recent draft and many enjoyable discussions on related topics; Michael McGhee, for his assistance on Eastern matters; Stephen Clark, Brendan Larvor and John Williamson for reading and commenting on Chapters 8 and 9; Tim Crane, for not reading more than he did; Gwynneth Knowles, whose suggestions for stylistic improvements I have not always followed, but which nonetheless made a difference.

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1 Introduction

1.1 The phenomenal

Since my main topic is the way experiences are interrelated within streams of consciousness, some preliminary clarifications concerning what I mean by ‘experience’ and ‘consciousness’ are in order. There is of course a limit on what can be said on this topic: if you do not know what it is like to have experience, words will not help, and there is probably no ‘you’ there to find out. But although ‘consciousness’ and ‘experience’ are to some extent primitive notions, they are also as hotly contested as any in philosophy. The literature is full of distinctions between different types of consciousness, theories about what can and cannot be said about consciousness, and the relationship between consciousness and the physical world. In this opening chapter I will indicate where I stand on a few of these issues, those that are relevant to what follows. In particular, I will have something to say about two distinctive types of experience, the experience of understanding and perceptual experience. I focus on the latter to avoid possible misunderstandings, and on the former because it is often ignored altogether. Also, as I will be spending a good deal of time trying to describe various features of our experience, I make some general comments on phenomenology and related matters.

I shall not try to defend the positions I endorse here in any detail, partly because some of the issues I mention will be taken up in subsequent chapters, but more importantly, because defending the general policy I adopt of taking experience seriously is a considerable undertaking in its own right. By ‘taking experience seriously’ I mean adopting a stance of robust, full-blooded realism about consciousness. This means taking consciousness as seriously as we take science. From this perspective, sensory experiences, bodily sensations and conscious thoughts are regarded as just as real as paradigmatic physical things such as mountains, houses and trees, and perhaps more real than some of the currently postulated occupants of the microphysical realm. It also means rejecting all attempts to reduce the experiential to the non-experiential. (So, for example, contrary to what some functionalists would say, there is more to being an experiential state than being a state with certain causal powers; an experience has certain intrinsic features over and

2 Introduction

above any causal powers it may have.) A good many philosophers think there are good reasons for *not* taking experience seriously. Although I think these philosophers are wrong, I will not engage with their arguments here. This has been done effectively by others, for example Foster (1991), McGinn (1991), Searle (1992), Flanagan (1992), Robinson (1994), Strawson (1994) and Chalmers (1996).

By 'consciousness' I mean *phenomenal* consciousness; by 'experiences' I mean states or items with a phenomenal character. The 'phenomenal character' of an experience refers to the distinctive *feel* the experience has. A state has a phenomenal character when there is something that it is like to have or undergo that state. A sudden severe stomach cramp that causes one to bend over double feels very different from a gentle tickle; the cramp and the tickle are sensations with a different phenomenal character. There is 'something it is like' to feel a raging anger, to see a magnolia coloured wall, to hear a cello tone, to struggle with a piece of mental arithmetic, to remember one's first day at school, to smell a roasting chicken, to imagine the flavour of ginger. These are all experiences, they all have different phenomenal characters.

Some experiences are more noticeable than others. In thinking of 'experiences' we tend to think first of what we can see and hear, our thoughts or memories, our more memorable pains and pleasures. We easily overlook the presence of those *bodily* sensations that form the backdrop of our consciousness: gentle sensations of texture and pressure (e.g. from our clothing), feelings of warmth or coolness, along with feelings in our muscles, organs and joints, and our sense of balance (standing upright feels different from standing on one's head). But these various bodily feelings all have their own distinctive phenomenal character, they all belong to the realm of experience.

As examples of items possessing phenomenal character I have referred to particular experiences, but experiences do not typically occur in isolation from one another. A stream of consciousness is an ensemble of experiences that is unified both at and over time, both synchronically and diachronically. The expression 'the unity of consciousness' is occasionally used to refer to the unity of the mind as a whole. Taken in this way, the topic is the way in which mental states of all kinds, experiential and non-experiential, are inter-related when they belong to the same mind. Since by 'consciousness' I mean phenomenal consciousness, by the 'unity of consciousness' I mean the unity of experience. Let us pause to consider this unity in a little more detail.

Imagine a party game: participants are blindfolded and handed an object, and they have to work out what the object is relying on touch alone. It is your turn, and panic is starting to set in; your three minutes are nearly up and you still have no idea what your object is; the taunts and laughter from your audience are starting to annoy. The thing you are handling is quite small, made of plastic, and obviously a contraption of some kind, it has several moveable parts, some hinged. You suspect there is a way to get the whole thing to fold up, but the various extremities can move in a bewildering

number of directions, and you have been unable to manoeuvre them into any recognizable shape. Your best guess is that it is some sort of puzzle, an executive toy or some such thing. But too late: jeers erupt, your time has run out. Tearing off the blindfold you look at the mysterious object, only to find that you are still no wiser. Anger now surges – how could you hope to identify by touch an object you don't recognize when you see it?

Consider a few snapshots of your stream of consciousness during these few minutes; each snapshot consists of your experience over a brief interval.

- 1 As you start to manipulate the object you have tactile sensations in your hands and fingers. These do not occur by themselves, but are continuous with the rest of your bodily experience (e.g. your body-image: sitting hunched in a chair). You are also having some thoughts – ‘What is this damned thing?’ – emotional feelings (mounting frustration), and mental images (you are trying to find an image to fit the feel). These thoughts and images do not occur in isolation from one another, they are experienced together – they are *co-conscious* – both with one another (thought + emotional feeling + mental image) and your various bodily experiences.
- 2 The audience was silent at first, but has now started to make its presence felt; you try not to pay attention to the racket they are making, but can hear them nonetheless. So now there are auditory experiences which are co-conscious with your thoughts, mental images, emotional feelings and bodily sensations.
- 3 You have just removed the blindfold, so visual experiences now enter the mix; these are co-conscious with all your other experience: what you hear and feel in your body, what you are thinking and feeling emotionally (a mixture of anger, frustration and puzzlement).

Each of these brief cross-sections is an instance of simultaneous experiences being experienced together, or bearing the relationship of co-consciousness to one another. As the example makes plain, experiences of different sorts can be, and typically are, co-conscious; indeed, at least as a first approximation, it seems likely that all our experiences at any given moment are mutually co-conscious.

But experience is also unified over time, at least over fairly brief intervals, of the duration of the so-called specious present. Handling the contraption while blindfolded produced a sequence of tactile sensations. As you trace a contour with a finger you feel a continuous sensation of smoothness, not a succession of discrete bursts of sensation. As you try to visualize what you are holding you imagine one object after another; each image lasts a short while, and when one object replaces another the transition itself is experienced. When the audience becomes restless you hear a rumbling of muttering and murmuring, a flow of sound which as it runs on is continually renewed. And all the while, there is the constant presence of bodily feeling