

In the *Times Literary Supplement*, August 5, 2011, p. 24. (Headline is theirs.)

Constitutive

Review of *The Unity of Consciousness* by Tim Bayne.

Consciousness studies comprises a myriad of problems: How is it possible that the atoms that make you up produce bright conscious experiences? Why is there consciousness at all?—and on and on. Tim Bayne’s new book takes up the central issue of unity: What, if anything, unifies the multiplicity of experiences that one has at a time? What is the nature of unity of consciousness?

Although these are difficult questions, Bayne’s overall position can be brought out by a simple example: Suppose that you are sitting in a bar hearing the bartender mixing a mojito and thinking that it is time for your friend to meet you. You are having not only two (token) experiences, but three: In addition to (1) hearing the bartender and (2) having the thought that it is time for your friend to meet you, you are also having the more complex experience of (3) hearing the bartender mixing a mojito *while* thinking that it is time for your friend to meet you.

This scenario illustrates what Bayne calls the ‘Unity Thesis’: “Necessarily, for any conscious subject of experience (S) and any time (t), the simultaneous conscious states that S has at t will be subsumed by a single conscious state—the subject’s total conscious state.” (p. 16) Bayne offers a mereological model of subsumption: An experience subsumes another if it takes the latter as a part. The mereological model of subsumption leads to a mereological account of phenomenal unity: “Experiences are phenomenally unified with each other exactly when they occur as parts of a single experience.” (p. 45) The burden of the book is to explain, defend and tease out the implications of the Unity Thesis.

One minor complaint: The kind of necessity invoked by the Unity Thesis is unclear. In the first chapter, Bayne disavows both conceptual and metaphysical necessity; he does not even claim that the unity of consciousness is grounded in the laws of nature. His “only claim is that we have no good reason to think that any [disunifying] division [in the stream of consciousness] has actually occurred in the members of our own species.” (p. 17) This does not seem like any kind of necessity at all.

Experiences—Bayne uses the word ‘experience’ interchangeably with ‘conscious state’—are thought of as instantiations of phenomenal properties: “properties that are individuated in terms of what it’s like to have them.” (p. 70) Bayne takes a ‘liberal’ position on the use of the term ‘phenomenal’: He applies it to conscious intentional (representational) states—like thoughts—as well as to sensory states. “[C]onscious thoughts possess a ‘what it’s likeness’ in precisely the same sense in which perceptual states and bodily sensations do.” (p. 6) So ‘phenomenal consciousness’ is pleonastic: “*all* consciousness is phenomenal consciousness.” (p. 7) Hence, Bayne’s position is that all a subject’s conscious states at a time t are phenomenally unified at t.

For most of the book, Bayne takes subjects of experience (“selves”) to be organisms (p. 9, p. 16). Research in psychology and neuroscience—on pathologies like anosognosia, schizophrenia, dissociative identity disorder, and on nonpathological phenomena like hypnosis and the “split-brain syndrome”—seems to suggest certain kinds of *disunity* of consciousness. Bayne counters these suggestions in various ways: for example, although the pathologies are disruptions of the

“coherence and integration that consciousness—particularly self-consciousness—normally displays,” they provide no “good reason to posit a breakdown in the *phenomenal* unity of consciousness.” (p. 172) Although Bayne’s own views are often tentative (“One might venture the thought that...”, “I am inclined to think that...”, “I remain unpersuaded...”), he draws cautious conclusions from the wealth of empirical work that he discusses.

The last chapter is the most provocative. Surprisingly, Bayne withdraws his stipulation that selves are to be understood as organisms. Both biological and psychological (neo-Lockean) treatments of the self “fail to ensure that the intimate relations between the self and the unity of consciousness are secured.” (p. 269) So, Bayne reverses course: Instead of beginning with a fixed idea of the self (as an organism), “start with the thought that selves must have a unified consciousness and use this claim to *constrain* our conception of the self.” He develops “a notion of the self according to which the relationship between the self and the unity of consciousness is *constitutive*.” (p. 281)

Bayne’s idea (similar to Mark Johnston’s in *Surviving Death*) is that the self is merely an intentional object—an entity “whose identity is determined by the cognitive architecture underlying a stream of consciousness.” Transposing Dennett’s notion of the self as a center of narrative gravity, Bayne advises us to think of the self as “a merely virtual centre of ‘phenomenal gravity.’” The self is brought into being by *de se* representations that represent subjects to themselves *as themselves*. The “*de se* representations that occur within a single phenomenal field will be co-referential”—thereby tying the self to the unity of consciousness. (p. 289)

Nevertheless, this conception of the virtual self is quite thin and underdescribed. (i) It seems circular. *De se* representations represent the same self when they occur in the same phenomenal field. How can two contemporaneous phenomenal fields be distinguished except by appeal to a self? (ii) The ontological status of the virtual self is mysterious. After appealing to the fictional detective Hercule Poirot as an extended analogy to the virtual self, Bayne disclaims a salient feature of the analogy. Whereas the character Hercule Poirot is to be contrasted with “real (non-fictional, actual, existent) Belgian detectives,” no such contrast pertains to selves: “The kinds of selves that we possess are as real as selves get.” (p. 293) The “self is a non-negotiable feature of our cognitive architecture, and it is no more possible to think away one’s own self than it is to think away one’s own life.” (p. 294) Thus ends the book, raising without answering, perplexing questions about the nature and status of selves.

The Unity of Consciousness is nevertheless impressive in the range of topics discussed. In addition to the empirical issues already mentioned, Bayne delicately evaluates the evidential value of introspective reports, and he explores a number of fascinating implications of the Unity Thesis about holism and atomism and the sense of embodiment, as well as conceptions of the self. *The Unity of Consciousness* thus highlights a wealth of issues related to consciousness.

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