

Commentary **Søren Willert**

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Is consciousness a thing or an adjunct?

1

During a period of, roughly, ten years I have made myself an active contributor to the debate concerning the epistemic status of consciousness. Most of my contributions have been in Danish (Willert, 1994; 1997; 1999; 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2002a; 2002b), only a few summary statements have been in English (2000d; 2001). Some of my contributions have been mainstream academic in their nature. Other contributions have strongly reflected the fact that important parts of my work identity are lodged in the professional fields of psychotherapy and / or organization consultancy. Based on my therapist and consultancy experiences, I have developed a working model describing the way a client system's selfconsciousness (i.e. the system's capacity for self-observation, as a pre-requisite for self-intervention) may be used as a working tool for the professional practitioner (see Willert, 2000d for an English-language presentation). In what follows, I shall not refer directly to this work. Still, in an indirect manner it will certainly colour the viewpoints presented below.

2

Overgaard presents his article as a potential bridge building project between, on the one hand, *cognitive neuroscientists* doing experimental research on consciousness according to natural scientific standards, on the other hand a loosely defined group called *general psychologists* whose professional interest in the concept of consciousness is theoretically flavoured not only by psychology as such, but also by neighbouring disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and the humanities in general. As it appears, Overgaard seems to have experienced a distrustful attitude among the latter group towards the former. Some general psychologists should be prone to view the research activities of cognitive neuroscientists as 'completely irrelevant' to general psychology due to the supposedly reductionist, narrowminded quality of these activities. It is Overgaard's contention that such a distrustful attitude is not – or should I rather say: is not *necessarily* justified, and this is the message he wants to convey through his text. This he does by presenting basic conceptual clarifications concerning important research objects of cognitive neuroscience (conscious state, introspective state...). To his mind, these clarifications should satisfy not only the demands of the otherwise disgruntled general psychologists, but also, to an at least reasonable degree, the metatheoretical demands put to cognitive

neuroscience, even by the discipline's most exacting philosophical watchdogs. In this manner, he sees the clarifications as parts of his bridge building project.

3

Strictly in view of my own preferred ways of dealing with the consciousness issue, I can identify myself with the kind of general psychologist Overgaard is referring to as potential target group for his article. To me, the concept of consciousness is definitely not limited to what can be measured in a laboratory setting. On the other hand, I do not bear the kind of grudges against cognitive neuroscientists which, according to Overgaard, I might be expected to bear. From Overgaard's brief descriptive remarks concerning these grudges, I understand them as expressions of a *fight about ownership* of the concept or phenomenon of consciousness. Does consciousness belong to 'soft science'? – does it rather belong to 'hard science'?

Now, if you want that question answered in a clear Yes / No-manner: *Either* it belongs to one *or* to the other, *but not to both* – then I see the question as an invitation to reductionist thinking, no matter whether it is the 'soft science' representative or the 'hard science' representative who in this manner wants to grab the whole consciousness package for himself. Such an attitude makes no sense to me. My own professional work profile places me in the 'soft science' field rather than the 'hard science' field. Still, generally speaking I have been intellectually enriched not only by familiarizing myself with the cognitive neuroscience approach in its laboratory, 'hard science' versions. But also by following the philosophical debates *surrounding* cognitive neuroscience, e.g. debates such as those referred to by Overgaard in his article text.

4

Rather than have fights concerning the more or less exclusive ownership of consciousness, I think the concept is most fruitfully dealt with through a collaborative approach guided by the assumption that *there will always be more to consciousness* than can be accounted for by any of the various professional groupings who have intellectual stakes in the concept.

This viewpoint is what lies behind the question I put in the title of this comment: Is consciousness a thing (i.e. *one and*

the same thing regardless of investigational approach) or an adjunct (i.e. a chameleon-like figure-of-speech changing appearance according to present investigational approach). I believe viewing consciousness as an adjunct is the most advisable approach.

5

In the beginning and (indirectly) at the end of the target article, general psychologists are directly addressed and appealed to by Overgaard. The larger part of his article, however, I read as being in fact primarily addressed to a cognitive neuroscience audience. On the whole, I find Overgaard's viewpoints, arguments and suggestions well founded. In one particular passage, however, I did find myself in partial disagreement with Overgaard's text. I believe this disagreement is linked to my predilection for the 'adjunct' position.

One paragraph on page 16 opens with Overgaard making reference to various concepts from the natural and social sciences: gravity, protons, electrons, social dynamics. My inner comment while reading this part of the paragraph was "Oh yes, these concepts are probably good formal analogues to the concept of consciousness." However, when reading the very last lines of the same paragraph, it appeared that according to Overgaard the said concepts were *not* analogues to the concept of consciousness. In fact, their very character of being non-analogues was what had prompted him to mention them: "Consciousness is <in counterdistinction to the said concepts/SW> *not* an inference made to explain behaviour; it is directly observable in itself..." – and then follows other sub-statements activating no disagreement from my side.

My one misgiving is with the phrase "it is directly observable in itself".

Even though, as stated in para 1 of this present comment, I have for a period of roughly ten years taken a professional interest in consciousness, I have never had the privilege of *directly observing consciousness in itself*. Tables, chairs, computer screens, brains, colour sensations, feelings of elatedness or of awe... - *all these* I know as observables, or phenomena, i.e. experiential objects appearing to me. At no point in time, however, have I been confronted with an experiential object deserving the name *consciousness in itself*. I do not believe I will ever be thus confronted.

7

'Everybody knows' the fable about the seven blind men who searched various parts of an elephant – and on that basis reached widely different conclusions as to the character of the object under investigation. The point of that fable is that, yes indeed – there actually *was* an elephant, a real one, and no more than one; even though the seven investigators, due to methodological limitations, found seven different pseudo-elephants.

Many professional groups are stakeholders in the investigation of consciousness. But does that necessarily mean

consciousness in itself is 'an elephant'? – i.e. one particular something.

The world we live in contains large numbers of *living creatures* for whom consciousness – in some sense of the term – is an indispensable tool (a necessary adjunct) for their living the way they do. In the language of the fable, 'living conscious creatures' definitely constitute 'an elephant'.

Likewise, the world we live in has *neural systems*, the activities of which somehow lie behind or are functionally responsible for the phenomena linked to consciousness. 'Neural systems', to me, also constitute 'an elephant'.

As a consultant and social scientist, I am confronted with *social systems*: groups, organizations, cultures... that can be said to maintain themselves as systems through the use of what may be called conscious measures. I have no problems in granting 'elephant' status to social systems.

But what about consciousness itself, or consciousness in itself...? Is it a good idea, is it necessary, is it convenient, is it required for ontological or epistemological reasons that we (in the language of the fable) grant it 'elephant' status? I am not sure.

8

Once upon a time, *Descartes* with much vigour decided consciousness should be treated as 'an elephant'. Many have followed him, some explicitly, others implicitly, i.e. without really knowing what they were doing or the implications thereof. All in all, I do not think the ideas then planted by *Descartes* were very good ideas.

There may well be non-cartesian ways of treating consciousness as 'an elephant', i.e. as one particular something. Still, in my own view many of the *non-fruitful* intellectual entanglements characterizing the present debate concerning the concept of consciousness are due to the fact that the discussants, without realizing it, are under some kind of cartesian spell.

In whichever way consciousness is made the object of scientific investigations, I do find it important that the conceptual framework for these investigations is *not* construed in a manner that easily makes us fall prey to cartesian confusions.

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