

Barry C. Smith

## *Consciousness*

### *An Inner View of the Outer World*

Right now my conscious experience is directed at part of the world. It takes in some aspects of things around me and not others. Some bits of the world occupy my attention, other worldly goings on condition or colour the character of my current perceptual experience. I experience buildings in view through the window, the clothes in the corner of the room, the colour of the walls, the plate with breads, the coffee mugs, the smell of fresh laundry, the muffled sounds of someone in the kitchen, the sounds from the street: a sequence of things that in turn capture my attention moment to moment. And all the while thoughts occur to me, modulating my conscious awareness. I have no doubt that the world and my place in it, together with my recent past history, explains the particular form my consciousness takes right now. But what shape does that explanation take? Things out there beyond the boundaries of my skin enter into the conscious events I undergo. The inner is in this way shaped and determined by those outer things that impress themselves on the mind. What is it, though, for consciousness of this kind to go on at all?

To say that consciousness is, in certain crucial respects, dependent on the world and one's place in it, is not enough to say all that needs to be said about consciousness. There is a contribution I make to these events, there are the inner aspects of consciousness. Right now I feel the faint early signs of a headache, still off-shore but likely to take up more and more of my attention. There is the awareness I have — not always but there right now — that the things I see or hear are being seen or heard by me at the moment. I know that they are there, that they occur anyway whether I see or hear them at all. But no one else is having this very experience of them. As I look at the corner of the room, or out of the window at the buildings beyond, I am aware that no

one else enjoys this view right now, this particular perspective on the world. They could have done, or will do, perhaps, but right now they are not enjoying what I currently experience: only I am presently seeing things from here. There is an awareness of the world from this point of view and an awareness of my sole experience of enjoying it. I am aware of my consciousness as a unique event, or it being mine. Equally, I can tell that no one else is seeing the way the room looks from the opposite corner. They could have been but they are not. A chance for a certain conscious experience has not been taken by anyone. No consciousness of the room from that perspective is being enjoyed right now because there is no one there. There would have to be someone standing in that place, awake and aware, attending to the room and not lost in thought, for there to be such a conscious episode. We know that occupying that space and being a certain kind of minded animal, or brain active creature, is necessary for such a conscious episode to take place. Despite knowing this we seem to know nothing else about what makes such a unique episode available to someone, and appreciable by them for what it is.

Returning to my current experience, I am aware of the independent existence of what I am seeing from my seeing of it: I am aware of the transient nature of my conscious seeings. I stare momentarily at a farmhouse through the window of a train and it then disappears from sight. My experience is one thing: the briefly perceptible farmhouse another. I can also interrupt my conscious awareness of the carriage around me by closing my eyes.

There is also a certain range or reach to my consciousness: it extends outwards and all around me (save perhaps for the space just at the back of my head). It takes in certain things at a certain distance from me. What lies outside my current conscious reach can only be thought about, not heard or felt, smelled, touched or seen. Sometimes the extent of my conscious reach expands when I attend to the noise of the street or the distant sound of a taxi. Sometimes it contracts when I'm lost in thought or pre-occupied with worries not related to the here and now. The mind's eye can turn inward and I can temporarily lose my consciousness of the world. When ill or in a fever the world can shrink to very local concerns with the body. Recovery is sometimes signalled by noticing how far one's conscious awareness now reaches.

The full extent of the world that occupies my attention when I am awake and alert is what I call my cognitive surround. My current cognitive surround is fairly extensive: it takes what is happening (heard) in the next room. This cognitive environment (to borrow a term from Sperber and Wilson [1986]) as created by my current conscious

awareness centres on me and radiates out from this centre. It is a consciously experienced world that is not solely located in my cranium: it is not, nor does it feel like, the goings on in an internal, private realm. Instead it is a way the world is presented to me right now and a way of my being in the world. It is not shared with another, although we can have overlapping cognitive environments, we can share aspects of our conscious surroundings. Others can enter my immediate cognitive environment by speaking to me and grabbing my attention. Their words re-configure my experience in certain speech-directed ways. I cannot but hear the sounds uttered as meaningful: as someone saying such and such, and my experience is changed by what they say. The conscious mind is very easily violated by others' words: they get right through to us, entering our minds uninvited.

This interplay between inner and outer, described above, shows the way consciousness depends on both the subject's physical *and* internal environment. The world and the people in it have a part to play in shaping our consciousnesses. But the world is not enough. For it is not just *what* we are aware of but also the fact of our *being aware* of it (even our awareness of being aware), that we seek to explain.

Within conscious experience we can be aware of the difference between what we experience and our having that experience. Consciousness — or at any rate the consciousness human beings enjoy — makes this difference immediately available to us for reflection, and it is this feature that is characteristic of the consciousness we care about and deem worthy of philosophical attention. And yet it is this feature of consciousness that seems to go missing in Ted Honderich's radically externalist account of consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

Despite offering a novel and usefully externalist perspective on consciousness, as well as many important criticisms of other accounts, Honderich's own position doesn't quite scratch the itch it creates. He begins with a person seeing a page, and he asks what 'exactly your consciousness of the page' consist in. (Actually, he asks 'What did your consciousness *seem* to consist in?'). We are told,

*It was for the page to be there.* What your consciousness seemed to consist in was nothing other or more than that (p. 5).

But this is a very minimal account of a conscious experience — especially of one we have been invited to attend to. Is what it was like for you to be conscious of the page really no more than Honderich says it is? Although useful attempts are made to put it in other words, the

[1] Honderich (2006). In this commentary all page references are to this target paper unless stated otherwise.

doctrine of Radical Externalism about consciousness remains a little elusive. Honderich goes on to say:

the state of affairs that was *the page's being there*, a state of affairs outside your head, is one of the several most fundamental propositions of the Radical Externalism that is our subject (p. 6).

By itself this is a sensible corrective to Cartesian individualism about the mental: a welcome feature of Radical Externalism. But we need more. Honderich seeks to oblige:

More fully, to be perceptually conscious is only for an extra-cranial state of affairs to exist — for there to be a spatio-temporal set of things with a dependence on another extra-cranial state of affairs and also on what is in a particular cranium. The page's being there, and more generally *your world of perceptual consciousness* is things being in space and time, with such further properties as colour, and being dependent on a scientific or noumenal world underneath and also dependent on you neurally (p. 6).

And again:

The Radical Externalism being contemplated here in one of its three parts is indeed the general proposition that what it is to be perceptually conscious is for a world in a way to exist — i.e. for things to be in space and time with certain properties and for them to have certain necessary conditions (p. 7).

The key locution, and one Honderich has used in other writings to do a lot of the work, is: 'consciousness is *for a world in a way to exist*'. What world? What way? Exist how? We need all of these questions answered if we are to feel comfortable that Radical Externalism is telling us something about conscious visual experience. For things to be in space and time is for there to be real things, parts of the actual world. But their existence is not enough for consciousness. Many parts of the world right now exist with no one being conscious of them. In some cases, the world we are conscious of, populated as it seems to us with certain objects, does not exist in that way. (More of that in a moment.) If the world (or the part of it) I am conscious of exists, and therefore plays a role in my having the conscious experience I am now having, we can agree to that condition. But what else is needed to get at my being conscious of my surroundings? It is not just for that world, or that part of the world to exist — it is for it, in a way, to exist. What way? Its existing in a way I am consciously aware of? No. Honderich rightly criticises accounts that resort to talk of *awareness*, or of things being perceptually available to *me* since they offer no explanatory advance but merely presuppose the elusive

phenomenon we are trying to explain. And yet, we will be obliged to use these terms until we have enough insights from elsewhere, or other terms, to enable us to see that we don't need to make appeal to them anymore and now do understand what those terms either presuppose or gesture at.

But we are far from there as things stand. The world, or the selective perspective on it our conscious experience affords us, requires something to exist, but in what way that will make our consciousness of it intelligible enough to dispense with talk of awareness or how things appear to us? As far as Honderich's focus on the world is concerned, are we talking about the perceived *world*, or are we talking about the *perceiving* of a world? Surely the topic of consciousness is mainly concerned with the latter.

Let us now tackle the theme we passed over, that of consciousness sometimes presenting a world of things that appear a certain way even when those things do not exist. In somewhat Johnsonian fashion, Honderich tries to defuse traditional objections to direct perception theories based on illusion or hallucination. Here we have him saying:

Well, I myself can tell the difference between a state of affairs that is the existence of ordinary things and a state of affairs that is the existence of representations of ordinary things. In our lives as they are, there is a good difference between representations, which can be in various ways wrong, and ordinary things, which can't. Seeing isn't like dreaming — seeing doesn't seem to be like dreaming, which truth is unaffected by your having to get out of the dream to know the fact (p. 7).

That may be, but of course some people can't always tell the difference. The Nobel Prize winning mathematician, John Nash, like many other schizophrenics reported lucid, stable and persisting hallucinations of people confronting him and talking to him. It is clues from something other than their conscious perceptions that tell them that the people they see and talk to are not real. In Nash's case he realised that the daughter of the friend he repeatedly encountered was not getting any older and so could not be real. He was unable to banish these persisting hallucinated figures or to stop their words impinging on his consciousness and altering his current experience. He even had to check with others whether the people he apparently confronted were really there. Schizophrenics will often tell you the imaginary people they see are as real to them as you or I. The condition is so distressing for the sufferers precisely because without neuro-pharmacological help they cannot disabuse themselves of the existence of these imagined friends or tormentors.

These cases are more difficult to deal with than the usual cases of hallucination invented by philosophers. Here, we are not dealing with a dream world or simulation of reality produced by a brain in a vat. The experiences these schizophrenic patients undergo involve perceptions of their physical surroundings that really do exist and which they successfully negotiate, where these perceived surroundings are augmented by characters who do not actually exist. The consciousness of such patients is a consciousness of a world but one they have added to, and populated, with fictions of their conscious minds. Such experiences can only be explained as episodes in consciousness and talk of their being *for a world in a way to exist* may make sense, but now the key phrase is being used in a quite different way when it is the real world, or the world populated with imaginary objects, we are talking about. Consciousness is not always about existence and is not always fully captured by what is out there.

Finally, we get to the nub of the problem for Radical Externalism: subjectivity. Honderich tells us:

For Radical Externalism, perceptual consciousness consists in a state of affairs that not only is partly dependent on one individual, but is also different from related states of affairs dependent on other individuals. It is also different from the state of affairs that is the perceived physical world as well as other states of affairs that are in defined senses objective. If it is a near-physicalism, it does give clear sense to our conviction about subjectivity (p.12).

I don't agree. This statement tells us what subjectivity is not, but it does not give to us a clear sense of *what it is*. We are told that consciousness (with its essential subjectivity) depends on one individual. We also know it involves a swathe of the world. Earlier we were told that consciousness depends on that bit of the real world, perceived and scientifically describable, and on what is in the cranium of the individual. We can agree to all of this, but what we urgently need to know is what kind of dependence between these bits of the world produces the easily recognisable subjective experience of an individual? What is that dependence and how does it result in the states of mind we know so well? As yet, we have nothing more to go on.

My response has been largely critical and sceptical of the account Honderich offers us, and unlike Honderich I am offering nothing positive or new on the topic of consciousness, which remains one of the most puzzling in philosophy. Conscious phenomena are so close to us and so familiar and yet the nature of consciousness is so utterly inscrutable. It is a brave philosopher who dares to propose an account of its nature and attempts to satisfy our philosophical qualms that there is no

account to be given. Ted Honderich has made such an attempt and should be praised for doing so. He gives us all more material to get to work on.<sup>2</sup>

### References

- Honderich, T. (2006), 'Radical externalism', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **13** (7–8), pp. 3–13. [This issue]  
 Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. (1986), *Relevance* (Oxford: Blackwell).

### REPLY TO SMITH BY HONDERICH

Barry Smith's direct, deft and instructive evocation of ordinary experience at the beginning of his paper can take a Radical Externalist aback for at least a while. Yes, it is all too true that some bits of a room I am now in occupy my attention, are bits to which I attend. Can it also be, as Smith says, that some goings-on, maybe actions of another person, somehow condition or colour my current perceptual experience? Certainly thoughts do come to me in the course of my seeing the room. Indeed they are there more often than not in the course of my seeing the room. Does it make sense to say that they modulate my awareness?

You can wonder, as a Radical Externalist, whether or not your wondering was the aim of Smith's evocation of ordinary experience, if a world of perceptual consciousness contains more than items that occupy the attention of the perceiver, items to which he or she attends. The answer, on reflection, has to be yes. This follows from the fact, speaking ordinarily, that I do indeed see and otherwise consciously perceive more than I attend to. The state of affairs in which my perceptual consciousness consists must indeed be all that of which, speaking ordinarily, I am conscious. Does that proposition in itself raise further difficulty? Any such difficulty needs to be produced.

The fact of attention is a further good reason for an admission made before now (p. 00). The admission is that to speak of perceptual as against each of reflective and affective consciousness, or of either of those against the other, is to make a forceful separation of a process of which it may even be too simple to say that three currents in it affect one another and intermingle. What is attending to something? Well, it seems persuasive to say that it is to *think* or *feel* about one thing in particular of those you see. In which case, for Radical Externalism and presumably other accounts of consciousness, what we have a specific kind of eliding of perceptual and at least reflective consciousness.

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[2] My thanks to Ophelia Deroy for invaluable comments.