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Consciousness, conceptual agency, and the “unbinding” problem

Much discussion in consciousness studies focuses on how “inputs” from the various sensory modalities combine with “internal” brain processes to give rise to unified consciousness: the so-called *binding problem*.

For a number of phenomenologists and enactive philosophers, such an approach raises a number of concerns. First, it preoccupies itself with an “outdated” input/output-based model of cognition which may be useful for certain narrow applications but should, in the main, be rejected in favour of an intrinsically *interactive* model whose causal flow is not linear (“sense-motivate-plan-act”) but circular. Second, in line with the first concern, it assumes a problematic distinction between “internal” experience and “external” reality, where these researchers prefer to see an underlying continuity between agent and environment. Finally, by implicitly endorsing a reductive approach to consciousness – whereby, at least in principle, consciousness is fully reducible to simpler physical processes – it focuses on the “bottom up” where these researchers would rather see a complex interplay between “bottom up” and “top down”. In particular, they would like to distinguish between the *coming together* of consciousness in terms of its underlying mechanics, and the seemingly unavoidable reality that, phenomenologically speaking, all of us (including, arguably, those who are suffering from various mental health disorders) subjectively *experience* a consciousness that is, from the onset, *unified*. What *begins* as unified experience then gets progressively broken down into more and more fine-grained conceptual categories of e.g. sensory modalities, motor actions, “inputs”, “outputs”, thoughts, etc. This “unbinding” problem is arguably just as important to understanding subjective experience – phenomenology – as the binding problem is to understanding the underlying mechanics.

The arguments of (in their different ways) Jerry Fodor or Colwyn Trevarthen aside, we do not – on most accounts – start life as conceptual agents, even as we are predisposed to understand the world in certain ways and not in others. Likewise, logically at some point in our species’ past, we did not have the conceptual agency that we do today. One can either make the move that certain conceptualists do and claim that experience *just is* experience to the extent that it is conceptually structured; in which case there is a point, both as individuals and as species, where we lack experience. Or one can make the move that I prefer, that experience (with its seemingly inviolable unity) comes first – even as, for the mature conceptual agent, experience is an inextricable mix of the conceptual and the non-conceptual.