What is the Phenomenal Unity of Consciousness?

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Abstract

Phenomenally conscious experiences are unified into particular streams of consciousness. In order to account for this, Bayne and Dainton suggest there must be an ‘overall experience’ responsible for unifying less phenomenally complex experiences together. In order to distinguish this experience from the mere conjunction of experiences that compose it, they propose that this ‘overall experience’ possesses some additional phenomenal character.

Against this, I argue that, given that we don’t find this additional phenomenal character when we introspect, we ought to account for the phenomenal unity of consciousness in a way that doesn’t introduce an ‘overall experience’ which possesses additional phenomenal character. I suggest we do this by distinguishing between particular, count-quantifiable streams of consciousness, and the merely mass-quantifiable experiences that compose them. I propose that for experiences to be unified is for them to together constitute a single stream of consciousness.

1 Introduction

A recent development in the literature on the unity of consciousness sees theorists turning their attention to the notion of phenomenal unity (see Bayne (2010); Tye (2003); Dainton (2000)). The unity in question is the unity of our phenomenally conscious experiences. In these discussions it is sometimes claimed that there is ‘something it is like’ for phenomenally conscious experiences to be unified together. In this paper I argue that this claim is not supported by what we find when we introspect, but rather by the conjunction of three assumptions

1. A stream of consciousness, at a time, is composed of various experiences.
2. A stream of consciousness, at a time, differs from its constituents only in its phenomenal complexity.

3. Experiences are individuated by their phenomenal character

Having diagnosed the assumptions that lead to the claim that there is ‘something it is like’ for phenomenally conscious experiences to be unified together, I propose that we ought to reject claim 2. On my proposal, the difference between one’s overall stream of consciousness at a time and the experiences that compose it is purely ontological. It is the difference between something that admits of count-quantification (the stream of consciousness), and things that only admit of mass-quantification (experiences).

On the account proposed here, experiences are unified when, at a time, they together compose a single stream of consciousness. This account provides a way of ‘dissolving’ the problem of phenomenal unity, in that it avoids the need to specify an extra phenomenal ingredient in the stream of consciousness. Given that we don’t find such an ingredient when we introspect (see section 7) this is a desirable result.

In the literature on the unity of consciousness, it is common to distinguish between two different varieties of unity: the unity that holds between experiences at a time (synchronic unity), and the unity that obtains over time (diachronic unity). It is also common for authors to approach this topic by first providing an account of synchronic unity and then attempting to apply this account, with some modifications, to the diachronic case. In particular I have in mind the accounts of unity set out in Dainton’s *Stream of Consciousness* and Tye’s *Consciousness and Persons*.

In this paper I explore a different way of proceeding - namely to consider the diachronic character of experience before discussing the synchronic case. It is the examination of the diachronic character of experience that supports the claim that experiences, at a time, are merely mass-quantifiable. And it is the claim that experiences, at a time, are merely mass quantifiable that enables the dissolution of the problem of phenomenal unity.

### 2 Events and Activity

Crucial to what follows is the distinction between events and activity. While events are count-quantifiable, the activity that composes them is not - it is merely mass-quantifiable. Activity is the temporal stuff of events - with the relationship between
the two analogous to the relationship between objects and the stuff of which they are composed. For instance, while we can count how many times I walked to the shops, or how many times I ran, it isn’t possible to count how many times I [am] walking to the shops, or how many times I [am] running. Of running we can ask ‘how much?’ but not ‘how many?’ This point is nicely expressed by Crowther in the following:

What things are doing throughout a period of time, or what they are engaged in throughout a period of time, are like masses or substance-stuffs in not being count-quantifiable, only mass quantifiable. There can no more be two walkings or three runnings than there can be two golds or more than one rain. At least without significant departure from the process verb sense of the word, one cannot intelligibly ask: “How many runnings were there?” (Crowther, 2011, p16)

The thought that there is an important distinction between count-quantifiable events and the merely mass-quantifiable activity of which they are composed can also be found in Hornsby:

Just as there are neither bottlesful of beer or puddles of beer unless there is stuff of a certain type (sc. beer), so there are no strolls on someone’s part, unless there is activity of a certain type (sc. strolling) on their part. And just as beer pervades any volume of space occupied by beer, so strolling pervades any interval of time occupied by strolling. Things in space are comprised of stuff. And the events that Davidson was concerned with under the head of actions are comprised of activity. (Hornsby, 2012, p238)

Both philosophers are developing ideas that can be traced back to Mourelatos’ *Events, Processes, and States*. Crucial to this picture is the distinction between the bounded temporal particulars - events - and the merely mass-quantifiable temporal stuff that falls within those boundaries. In the spatial case we can distinguish between spatially bounded particulars (either objects or other count-quantifiable items such as lumps or puddles) and the stuff of which they are composed. An analogous distinction can be drawn in the temporal case.

We can distinguish between two different varieties of temporal entity to which this distinction might be applied: processes and accomplishments. Accomplishments are the kind of temporal particular that unfold towards a natural endpoint, while processes merely unfold over time, but lack a natural endpoint. Descriptions of accomplishments typically make reference to their endpoint. For instance: while
‘walking to the shops’ refers to an accomplishment, ‘walking’ refers to a process.

In the spatial case, we distinguish between lumps of stuff (e.g. a lump of clay) - which are demarcated by their boundaries - and objects (e.g. a statue) - which have a particular arrangement or organisation that is crucial to their identity. Similarly, in the temporal case, we can distinguish between stretches of process (a particular stretch of running), and particular accomplishments (a walk to the shops). Stretches of process and particular accomplishments are both varieties of count-quantifiable particular that we can refers to under the umbrella of ‘event’. Events are composed of merely mass-quantifiable activity - this activity is the ‘temporal stuff’ (‘walking to the shops’, ‘running’) of events.

With this distinction between particular events and the merely mass-quantifiable activity of which they are composed in mind, we can now begin to think about how sensitivity to this distinction might be fruitfully used in the philosophy of mind. We can begin by considering Hornsby’s recent discussion of actions, before applying some considerations taken from that account to the case of experiences.

3 An Illustration: The Temporal Profile of Actions

In Actions and Activity, Hornsby identifies a mistake that might be made when thinking about actions - namely that they are to be analysed only in terms of relations between particulars. This is a mistake that she identifies herself as making in Hornsby (1980). This mistake can lead one to conclude that actions can only occur ‘inside the body’:

It is very natural to identify someone’s raising her arm with her arm’s going up. When one sees what goes on when someone raises her arm, one cannot perceptually discriminate between her changing the position of her arm and the position of her arm’s changing. Moreover if her raising of her arm did cause her arm’s going up, then presumably it would be temporally prior to her arm’s going up, and thus should be conceived as something which happens inside her from which her arm’s going up ensues. (Hornsby, 2012, p234)  

This account is deemed problematic because it ‘renders actions invisible’ - actions become internal, and thus invisible, events. This conclusion is hard to accept, given
the apparent obviousness with which we can see one another acting. The problem arises because of two assumptions. The first is that actions are causal types of things - they are things brought about by agents. The second is that causation is a relation between particular events. With these two assumptions in place, it becomes difficult to see how the event of someone’s raising her arm and the event of her arm going up could be identical, or even temporally coincident.

The thought runs as follows: In order to think of there being a causal connection between these two events, they must be distinct particular events. If these events are distinct particulars, and one of these particulars is causally responsible for the other, then it is very natural to think that one event must occur before the other. The event of the agent raising her arm is thus rendered both internal to the subject and temporally prior to the event of the agent’s arm going up.

Hornsby is driven to reject this account by the ‘invisibility’ problem, but we might be equally keen to reject it because it seems to misconstrue the temporal structure of actions. In the arm case, it is plausible that my causal role isn’t over until my arm has gone all the way up. We should therefore be suspicious of an account that places the terminus of an agent’s causal role at a time before the arm has even started to go up. Hornsby’s strategy for blocking the line of thought that leads to this undesirable picture of actions is to deny the second assumption:

In order to recognize causality as present on an occasion of someone’s raising her arm, one needs to think of a person’s raising her arm as a type of causal activity in which she engages. A person is engaged in such activity from the moment at which her arm starts to rise; and her arm is going up so long as she is engaged in it. This is because her arm’s moving upward is what she is causing throughout the time that she raises her arm. The agent herself plays a causal role, and does so by virtue of causality’s being internal to activity in which she engages. (Hornsby, 2012, p234)

I don’t wish to take a stance on whether this account provides a good solution to the problem of invisible actions in this paper. Rather, I want to note that Hornsby’s proposal does seem to give the right account of the temporal structure of actions. Hornsby’s suggestion in the above has the merit of placing the agent’s causal role in a temporal location that is concurrent with her arm’s going up. The proposal does this by introducing the notion of agential activity that the subject is engaged in throughout the interval that her arm is going up.
4 The Temporal Profile of Experiences

From Hornsby’s discussion of actions we learn that we can only get the temporal profile of actions right if we recognise the category of *activity*. Likewise, one might think that we can only ascribe to *experiences* the correct temporal profile if we recognise that they are events that are composed of activity. To see this, consider two different ways of thinking about temporal experience set out in Dainton’s *Stream of Consciousness*:

Let us suppose that you do see G occurring after R - you have an experience of succession. For this to be possible, it might seem that as you see G, you must also simultaneously be aware of just having seen R. It cannot be the other way round: you cannot be aware of G when you see R, since when you see R, G has yet to occur... If we are directly aware of the immediate past, this awareness is located in the present. Miller (1984:109) calls this *The Principle of Simultaneous Awareness*, or PSA.(Dainton, 2000, p133)

This first way of thinking about temporal experience approaches experiences in the same way as the mistaken approach to actions discussed above. It involves thinking about how two particulars - the particular event that is the object of experience, and the particular experience of that event - are temporally related to one another.

Given the plausibility of the thought that the event that is the object of experience is normally causally responsible for our experience of it, it is very natural to place the temporal location of the experience immediately after the temporal location of the object of experience. This line of thought is analogous to the one that placed the temporal location of ‘raising one’s arm’ immediately before the temporal location of my arm’s going up.

One kind of objection to this type of approach is that it fails to respect the way that experience seems to unfold concurrently with its objects. It appears, at least *prima facie* incompatible with a distinctive phenomenological feature of temporal experience noted by a number of philosophers: that the temporal location of experience and object phenomenologically seem to be one and the same:

When one perceives an unfolding occurrence...it seems to one as though one’s perceptual experience has the temporal location and duration of its object.(Soteriou, 2013, p90)

Our stream of consciousness inherits the temporal structure of the events
which are its contents. (Phillips, 2014, p6)

When I see the red flash being followed by the green flash, or when I hear a sequence of notes C-D-E, my experiencing of the succession does seem to run concurrently with the phenomenal contents which together constitute the succession; I am aware of the red flash before I am aware of the green flash... To this extent it is counterintuitive to suppose my awareness of the succession occurs an instant after the succession has occurred (or at the very last instant of the succession). (Dainton, 2000, p134)

What these philosophers have in common is the thought that perceptual experience phenomenologically seems to unfold concurrently with its object. An obvious way to accommodate this is to recognise that experiences are events that are composed of activity.

Analogously with Hornsby’s proposal about actions, we should recognise that experiencing R followed by G is a type of activity that unfolds concurrently with the worldly activity of R being followed by G. On this proposal, the subject is experiencing R followed by G throughout the time that the activity ‘R followed by G’ is going on. We can accommodate the idea that the worldly happening is causally responsible for the experience without needing to place the temporal location of the experience after the point at which G has finished occurring.

The fact that recognising the notion of experiential activity provides a good way of accounting for the apparent shared temporal location of experience and its object is perhaps hinted at in Dainton’s use of the continuous ‘experiencing’ in the above quotation. This kind of picture of the temporal profile of experiences - where experiential activity plays a crucial role in the account of temporal experience - is what is distinctive of the Extensionalist proposal about temporal experience. It is the ingredient in these accounts that explains why experience apparently unfolds concurrently with its objects. On an Extensionalist account, experience seems to unfold in this way because it does, in fact, unfold concurrently (or, given the small time-lags involved in perceptual experience, near-concurrently) with its objects.

5 Experiential Activity

A certain kind of account of temporal experience - Extensionalism - appeals to experiential activity in order to account for the phenomenologically manifest temporal
profile of experience. On this kind of proposal, a particular experiential event - say, the visual experience of R followed by G - is composed of experiential activity - experiencing R followed by G. I now want to argue that, when we consider things from the perspective of the subject, we don’t find experiential events, but only experiential activity.

We can begin by looking at Tye’s remarks about experience-individuation:

Consider an ordinary visual experience and suppose that it is exclusively visual. When did it begin? When will it end? As I write now, I am sitting in a library. Looking ahead, and holding my line of sight fixed, I can see many books, tables, people in the distance walking across the room, a woman nearby opening some bags as she sits down. Is this a single temporally extended visual experience? If not, why not?... These difficulties of individuation arise once it is assumed that the stream of consciousness divides into different token experiences...(Tye, 2003, p99)

Tye is noting a difficulty in determining when experiences begin or end. When we introspect, we don’t find clear boundaries that demarcate when one experiential event has started or finished. It is this feature of conscious experience that lies behind the idea that consciousness is ‘streamlike’. One way to illustrate this is to consider a contrast between spatial and temporal experience. If we are presented with an unchanging spatial array of objects, it will be relatively easy for us to determine the boundaries of our visual field. It will be easy for us to demarcate between what falls within our visual field and what does not.

When we turn to temporal matters, however, demarcating what we are currently experiencing is much more difficult. If, when listening to a C-major scale played at around three notes per second, you are asked to pick out how many notes are present in your experience at a particular time, you will struggle to determine where the boundary between perceptual experience and short-term memory should be placed. When it comes to the temporal case it can be extremely difficult to determine what does, and what does not, fall within your current perceptual experience.

The explanation for this difficulty, I suggest, is that the boundaries of temporal experiences aren’t manifest in the phenomenology. In the case of the C-major scale it is certainly true to say that first have an experience of notes C-D-E, then an experience of notes F-G-A. However, there is no discernible boundary between these two experiential events that we can attend to. We experience every note as following on from, and giving way to, the notes that temporally surround it. This type of thought is perhaps what James and Dainton have in mind in the following:
Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life. (James, 1890, p233)

Most would agree that from moment to moment our typical streams of consciousness seem continuous: each brief phase of our experience appears to slide seamlessly into its successor. These transitions appear so smooth that it is phenomenologically unrealistic to talk of discernibly distinct ‘phases’ at all; for the most part our consciousness unfolds as a continuous flow. (Dainton, 2008, p28)

One way to explain the absence of phenomenologically manifest experiential boundaries is to consider the nature of phenomenal consciousness. There is only ‘something it is like’ to have a given experience when that experience is happening. My phenomenally conscious experiences are the experiences that are presently unfolding, and not experiences that have already happened, or experiences that have not yet happened. The phenomenal character of my past experiences - experiences that have happened - is only accessible via memory. The phenomenal character of my future experiences - experiences that are not yet happening - is not something that I have any access to.

If this is right then it is unsurprising that we are unable to discern, in the phenomenal character of experience, the temporal boundaries of our experiences, for experiences are only phenomenally conscious so long as they are happening. When we introspect we find ongoing experiential activity, not completed - and hence bounded - experiential events. This discussion gives reason to doubt that when we introspect we find experiential particulars. If this is right, then it gives us reason to think that we should think of the unity of experiences as the unity, not of particulars, but of types of experience. This claim is crucial to the attempt to dissolve the problem of phenomenal unity that follows.
6 What is the Problem of the Unity of Consciousness?

The variety of unity that I am concerned with in this paper is *phenomenal* unity - the idea that there is ‘something it is like’ for consciousness to be unified. The thought shared by philosophers working on this problem is that in order to provide a complete characterisation of how things are experientially with a subject both at a time and over time, reference needs to be made to a *unity relation* which features in conscious experience. Consider the following from Bayne and Chalmers:

At any given time, a subject has a multiplicity of conscious experiences. A subject might simultaneously have visual experiences of a red book and a green tree, auditory experiences of birds singing, bodily sensations of a faint hunger and a sharp pain in the shoulder, the emotional experience of a certain melancholy, while having a stream of conscious thoughts about the nature of reality. These experiences are distinct from each other: a subject could experience the red book without the singing birds, and could experience the singing birds without the red book. But at the same time, the experiences seem to be tied together in a deep way. They seem to be unified, by being aspects of a single encompassing state of consciousness. (Bayne and Chalmers, 2003, p23)

What Bayne and Chalmers are describing in the above seems rather unusual. They are describing something about how consciousness seems, but they characterise this seeming as seeming ‘to be unified, by being aspects of a single encompassing state of consciousness’. On one reading of this, Bayne and Chalmers are suggesting that when we introspect we gain an insight into the metaphysical nature of our stream of consciousness - they are saying that it literally seems to us that we are having one very complex overall experience. However, given that it seems very implausible that we can introspect and thereby directly discern the metaphysical character of consciousness, I propose that this can’t be what they really have in mind.

We can get a clearer sense of what is going on in the above by distinguishing between two lines of thought that play a part in motivating the idea that an account of synchronic phenomenal unity is required. The first is metaphysical, and involves us seeking an answer to the question of what binds all of the various experiences had by a subject at a time into a single stream of consciousness. On this way of setting things up, providing an account of synchronic unity is engaging with the mereological project of describing sense in which the multiplicity of a subject’s experiences at a
time compose, at a time, a single stream of consciousness.

The second thought motivating the need for an account of synchronic unity is that we can attend to the element responsible for the unity of experiences by introspecting. Tye, for instance, claims: ‘What struck me with great intensity was the unity in my experience, the way in which my experience presented all these things to me together.’ (Tye, 2003, p.xi) Likewise, Dainton, in a similar vein, claims that ‘In talking of the ‘experienced relationship’ between the contents of consciousness I am not referring to anything mysterious or unfamiliar.’ (Dainton, 2000, p.xii)

The unity relation is thus, on this conception, a discernible phenomenal aspect of experience, and to provide an account of synchronic unity is to tell us more about the nature of this phenomenal aspect of experience - an aspect that, if is left out of a description of ‘what it is like’ for the subject, would render that description incomplete.

In practice, these issues tend to be run together - so the project of providing an account of synchronic unity ends up generating an account that not only explains the way that experiences are metaphysically bound together, but also tells us something about the phenomenal character of experience. This running together of the metaphysical and the phenomenal questions appears to be what is going on in the quotation from Bayne and Chalmer’s, and is also present in Tye, when he claims ‘it is phenomenally as if I were undergoing one [experience].’ (Tye, 2003, p18)

The problem of the unity of consciousness thus has two aspects to it: there is the metaphysical problem of explaining what binds distinct experiences together, and there is the problem of giving a characterisation of a subject’s experience that doesn’t leave out ‘what it is like’ for those experiences to be unified.

7 Is There a Problem? (I)

In my experience, a common conversational response made when someone is presented with the problem of phenomenal unity is to deny that there is a problem. More specifically, it is to deny that there really is ‘something it is like’ for experiences to be unified. In this section I want to articulate and defend this scepticism. In particular, I want to highlight a mistake that might mislead one into thinking that one can find this extra bit of ‘unity phenomenology’. This is the mistake of moving from the claim that experience doesn’t phenomenologically seem disunified, to the claim that it does phenomenologically seem unified.
A typical strategy, in attempting to describe the kind of phenomenal unity that we
purportedly find in experience, is to note how the experiences don’t seem to exhibit
some form of disunity. For instance, things don’t seem as they would if some of our
current experiences were not presently occurring at all (this idea is touched hinted
at in the passage from Bayne and Chalmers above), or if some of our experiences
were occurring in a different stream of consciousness:

Phenomenal unity is often in the background in discussions of the ‘stream’
or ‘field’ of consciousness... the field metaphor more accurately captures
the structure of consciousness at a time. We can say that what it is
for a pair of experiences to occur within a single field just is for them
to enjoy a conjoint phenomenally - for there to be something it is like
for the subject in question not only to have both experiences but to
have them together. By contrast, simultaneous experiences that occur
within distinct phenomenal fields do not share a conjoint phenomenal
character.(Bayne, 2010, p11)

Or even more generally, we are asked to contrast what we find in our stream of
consciousness with a scenario in which experiences occur ‘in isolation’ from one an-
other:

Holding a ripe apple in my hand, I experience a red surface and I expe-
rience a cold surface. These experiences aren’t experienced in isolation,
however. They are experienced together. This is part of the phenomenol-
yogy of my experience overall. There is a unity in my experience. In what
does this unity consist, given that I am subject to two different token
experiences, one visual, and one tactual? (Tye, 2003, p18) (note that
here Tye is characterising the ‘received view’, and should not be read as
endorsing this line of thought)

Look at your hand and snap your singers. 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). (Dainton, 2000, pxiii)

The right response at this point is to note that these cases do not illustrate that
there is a distinctive experiential item of ‘phenomenal unity’. We can perfectly well
agree that things would be phenomenally different for us if we were having different
experiences, or not having some of the experiences that we are as a matter of fact
having, without thinking that this is because of an experiential ‘phenomenal unity’
component.

The problem here is that of setting out what it might be for experiences to occur ‘separately’ from one another (or to be ‘isolated’ from one another), without this merely being a matter of them being had by different subjects of experience. For the fact that experiences don’t seem isolated in this sense fails to support the claim that there is a ‘unified’ way that things do seem when these experiences all compose a single stream of consciousness.

All of this suggests that there can’t be a purely introspection-based way of motivating the problem of the unity of consciousness - where this problem is that of specifying the unity relation that completes a characterisation of ‘what it is like’ for an experiencing subject. In the next section I will suggest that the reason that introspection alone doesn’t suffice to motivate the problem is because the idea that there is ‘something it is like’ for experiences to be unified only arises because the three assumptions about consciousness identified earlier.

8 Is There a Problem? (II)

How might one be lead to the thought that there is a phenomenal unity relation that we find when we introspect, given that it seems plausible that all we really find is an absence of disunity? In this section I suggest a diagnosis. I think we should agree with the very natural thought that there is a difference between a situation in which experiences are unified into a single stream of consciousness and a situation in which they are not (perhaps a situation involving multiple simultaneous stream of consciousness, had by different subjects).

However, I think we should be wary of the thought that a subject’s overall stream of consciousness at a time counts as ‘an experience’ in the very same sense that the experiences that compose it do. It is this thought, combined with the extremely plausible notion that experiences are to be individuated, at least in part, by their phenomenal character, that gives rise to the idea that there is a special ‘something it is like’ for experiences to be unified.

We can begin with an account of the kind of thought that drives the unity problem by looking at a passage from James, for the problem that he sets out is the same as the problem that Bayne, Dainton, and Tye are interested in:

Take a sentence of a dozen words, take twelve men, and to each one word.
Then stand the men in a row or jam them in a bunch, and let each think of his word as intently as he will; nowhere will there be a consciousness of the whole sentence. (James, 1890, p160)

The metaphysical version of the unity problem involves conceiving of a subject’s stream of consciousness at a time as consisting of a collection of distinct experiences. Once we think of experiences in this way, a problem arises about how, given their distinctness, they come to compose a single stream of consciousness. It is this line of thought that James has in mind in the above.

James goes on to say ‘Idea of a + idea of b is not identical with idea of (a + b). It is one, they are two...’ (James, 1890, p161) If we think that, in a stream of consciousness in which we find the experience of a and b, there are two further experiences that compose it - the experience of a, the experience of b - then questions arise about the nature of this composition relation. We know that, in general, the existence of a representation of a and a representation of b does not suffice for the existence of a representation of a and b - for as James points out, ‘it is one, they are two’. It is this kind of thought that provides the metaphysical foundation of phenomenal unity.

The metaphysical problem of phenomenal unity relies upon the assumption that a subject has an overall experience that is composed of further, less phenomenally complex, experiences. In James’ example, the problem is that of specifying how the two experiences are related so as to constitute one overall experience. Bayne and Dainton share the assumption that the ‘overall experience’ of a subject at a time is the same type of thing (an experience) as the experiences that compose it - it is distinguished only be being the most phenomenally complex experience that the subject has at a time.

If we accept the assumption that the difference between one’s overall experience and the experiences that compose it is just one of complexity, then the introduction of an additional phenomenal unity relation becomes inevitable. The line of thought goes as follows: the ‘overall experience’ is introduced to play a metaphysical role - it gives us our answer to what it is for experiences to be unified. Experiences are unified iff they compose, or are subsumed by, an overall experience.

Further, this experience isn’t conceived of as merely the conjunction of a collection of less phenomenally complex experiences:

This total state is not just a conjunction of conscious states. It is also a conscious state in its own right. If such a total conscious state exists, it
can serve as the “singularity behind the multiplicity” - the single state of consciousness in which all of a subject’s states of consciousness are subsumed. (Bayne and Chalmers, 2003, p27)

It would of course be a mistake to think just any combination of experiences constitutes a total experience. This noted, it remains the case that a particular total experience is wholly constituted from, and nothing over and above, a particular collection of experiences and their experiential interrelations. These interrelations include...the relationship of mutual co-consciousness. (Dainton, 2000, p188)

The ‘overall experience’ is what makes the many into one. However, if this ‘overall experience’ is indeed more than the conjunction of less complex experiences, then it looks as if it must have some additional phenomenal character - call this ‘phenomenal unity’. This is because it is plausible that experiences are to be individuated, at least in part, by their phenomenal character (see (Bayne, 2010, p24) (Dainton, 2000, p25)). If experiences are individuated by their phenomenal character, then the overall experience, if it is to be non-identical with the conjunction of the experiences that compose it, must possess a phenomenal character that is not exhausted by the conjunction of those experiences.

We are thus led, from the idea that experiences must be unified with one another in some way, to introduce a new way that consciousness must subjectively seem - it must seem \textit{unified}. It is combination of three claims that lead us to posit a ‘unified’ way of seeming.

1. A stream of consciousness, at a time, is composed of various experiences.
2. A stream of consciousness, at a time, differs from its constituents only in its phenomenal complexity.
3. Experiences are individuated by their phenomenal character

If this is right, then if we can find a way to plausibly deny one of these claims the motivation for thinking that there is a ‘unified’ way for things to seem will disappear. Given the plausibility of 3), I shall pursue only the denial of claims 1) and 2) in this paper. We can begin by looking at Tye’s account of unity, which denies claim one. in order to go about dissolving the problem of phenomenal unity.

The ‘One-Experience’ account of unity proposed by Tye analyses unity in terms of ‘simultaneously experienced perceptual qualities entering into the same phenomenal content.’ (Tye, 2003, p36) When I am simultaneously having perceptual experiences
in different sensory modalities, and am aware of my current mood, desires, and thoughts, there is just one experience which represents every apparent object of my awareness. Rather than thinking of unity as the unity of experiences, Tye proposes that unity is best thought of as unity of content - where content is unified by being the content of a single experience.

Tye’s account thus denies that a subject’s overall experience is composed of experiences. The ‘components’ of a single experience are merely different parts of the content of that experience. Tye’s proposal thus provides an elegant way to dissolve the problem of phenomenal unity. However, it faces a problem that ought to make us wary. The problem arises from the amount of work that content has to do in his account.

9 A Problem with the ‘One-Experience’ View

On Tye’s proposal, there is just one experience with an extremely complicated content. However, it is extremely plausible that, in order to fully account for our mental lives, we need to appeal to a number of different ‘manners of representing’/‘intentional modes’ one might bear towards various contents.

This line of thought can be found in Chalmers and Crane:

There are many different manners of representation. For example, one can represent a content perceptually, and one can represent a content doxastically (in belief): these correspond to different manners of representation. At a more fine-grained level, one can represent a content visually or auditorily. Chalmers (2004)

The content of a state is part of what individuates that state: that is, what distinguishes it from all other states. The other thing which distinguishes an intentional state is whether it is a belief, or a desire, or hope or whatever. Again following Searle, I call this aspect of the state-the relation which relates the subject to the content-the ‘intentional mode’. Crane (2003)

It looks plausible that a number of different items that can be conscious - beliefs, desires, hopes - can have the same content. I can consciously believe, desire, hope that P. Accordingly, the distinctions between these different items cannot be drawn via
appeal to content alone: we need to appeal to the involvement of different ‘manners of representing’/‘intentional modes’.

It is also plausible that different sense-modalities can have certain contents in common - for instance, shape and motion appear to be common objects of both sight and touch. However, given that there is a clear difference between experiencing these visually and tactualy, there is a strong motivation to posit visual and tactual ‘manners of representing’/‘intentional modes’.

The reason for wariness about the ‘One Experience’ proposal is thus driven by the thought that, without being able to appeal to ‘manners of representing’/‘intentional modes’, the proposal will not be able to do justice to the richness of our mental lives. A related reason to be sceptical about the ‘One Experience’ concerns how we are supposed to think of the attitudinal component of the one experience.

The one overall experience we have at a time is an attitude towards a complex content. However, it is not altogether clear what the relevant attitude might be. To illustrate with examples: is it the kind of attitude where its objects are taken as actual (perception) or merely possible (imagination)? As past (memory) or future (anticipation)? Given that the one-experience is intended to ‘take in’ the full range of conscious experience (including, therefore, perception, imagination, memory, and anticipation), it isn’t clear that there is a relevant kind of attitude to content that might fit the bill.

It might be that these problems ultimately prove solvable. However, to restrict ourselves to the project of explaining the diverse features of mentality purely in terms of content seems overly restrictive. I thus propose that the alternative strategy for dissolving unity that I provide, in lacking this restriction, should be deemed preferable. In the remainder of the paper I want to suggest an account that enables us to respect the spirit of his proposal, while avoiding some of these problems.¹

My strategy pursues the denial of the second assumptions about unity identified above (‘a stream of consciousness, at a time, differs from its constituents only in its phenomenal complexity’).

¹It is also worth noting here that Tye doesn’t explicitly argue for his view: his arguments are directed at illustrating problems with positing a ‘phenomenal unity relation’ (see (Tye, 2003, pp21-5)), and the ‘one experience’ is introduced to solve these. My own account, in not positing a ‘phenomenal unity relation’, is thus on at least as sound a footing as Tye’s.
10 Dissolving the Problem of Phenomenal Unity

The problem of phenomenal unity is the problem of how many experiences come to compose one overall stream of consciousness. Tye’s proposal is an attempt to dissolve the problem by denying the existence of the many experiences. Part of Tye’s insight is that the problem can be dissolved if we recognise that one’s overall stream of consciousness is of a fundamentally different nature from the entities that compose it.

Tye attempts to develop this thought in a number of different ways. First he draws an analogy with adverbial modification:

Suppose that this statement is true:

(S) Jones writes illegibly and Jones writes painstakingly.

It does not follow that

S* Jones writes illegibly and painstakingly,

at least on one natural reading of (S*). For if Jones writes illegibly but not painstakingly with his left hand and painstakingly but legibly with his right, then (S) is true but (S*) false. In this case, there is an event of Jones’s writing illegibly and there is an event of Jones’s writing painstakingly, but these are two distinct events...

In the case where (S*) is true, there is a kind of unity to Jones’s writing. Illegibility and painstakingness are combined together in a single instance of writing... But where (S*) is true, there are not two different writings, one painstaking and the other illegible, which somehow are unified together to produce a third, overarching writing that includes them.(Tye, 2003, p26)

He also appeals to the notion of constitution:

A large chunk of clay is used to make a statue at time t. The clay constitutes the statue without being identical with it. Suppose counterfactually that at time t’, where t’ is later than t, an artist cleverly removes much of the clay without remolding it so as to leave behind a small clay pot. In the counterfactual situation, the clay that remains constitutes a pot at t’. But in the actual situation... the smaller aggregate does not compose a pot. Indeed, it does not by itself actually compose or constitute any
ordinary thing. (Tye, 2003, p30-1)

Here are two very general ideas that we can take from these two analogies:

Tye’s first analogy introduces the idea that a single thing might count as unified if it combines items of different *types*. One event of writing might unify different types of writing without those types of writing themselves being particular events.

Tye’s second analogy gestures towards the idea (though is not entirely explicit about this) that we should take care to distinguish between bounded, count-quantifiable *particulars*, and the unbounded, mass-quantifiable *stuff* of which those particulars are composed.

It is at this point that we can draw a connection with the distinction between events and activity that came earlier. Earlier, I suggested that we should distinguish between the count-quantifiable particulars that are events, and the merely mass-quantifiable activity of which those events are composed. The count-quantifiable event, ‘a walk to the shops’, is composed of merely mass-quantifiable activity, ‘walking to the shops’. In being merely mass-quantifiable and in composing particulars, activity is a kind of temporal ‘stuff’.

We can also note that, even though activity is merely mass-quantifiable, it is nevertheless possible to count *types* of activity, where this falls short of counting *particulars*. Hornsby sets this thought out in the following:

> Each of raising one’s arm, strolling, walking, reading . . . is considered an activity by virtue of its being a type of activity. And when ‘raising an arm’, ‘strolling’, ‘walking’, ‘reading’ name types of activity, they are not count nouns. In understanding how they work, it can be helpful to think about another brand of non-count nouns - those which name types of stuff. Names of stuffs don’t pick out particulars. If a name of a stuff can be pluralized, that is not because particulars satisfy it, but because there can be different types of a single stuff. So for instance ‘gold’ names a type of stuff; and someone who speaks of three golds has to mean three types of gold. (Apparently jewellers say that there is yellow gold, white gold, and rose gold.)(Hornsby, 2012, p237)

Both of the ideas that I have suggested can be found in Tye’s analogies (particular events unify items of different *types*, and particulars are composed of merely mass-quantifiable *stuff*) thus find a home in the notion of *activity*. I therefore propose that we can develop an account of phenomenal unity in the spirit of Tye’s account.
whereby a particular stream of consciousness is, at a time, composed of a number of different types of experiential activity.

11 An Alternative Account of Phenomenal Unity

The problem of phenomenal unity is the problem of specifying how the many experiences I am having at a time come to constitute a single stream of consciousness at a time. If we conceive of streams of consciousness and the experiences that compose them as of fundamentally the same type of thing - i.e. the stream of consciousness is just a very complicated kind of experience - then various puzzles arise. For instance, what is the additional phenomenal element that distinguishes the overall experience from the experiences that compose it?

Note, however, that talk of my having many experiences at a time leaves open whether I am talking about particular, count-quantifiable, experiences, or merely different types of mass-quantifiable experience. I argued earlier that what we find when we introspect are not bounded, count-quantifiable, particular experiences, but is merely ongoing, mass-quantifiable, experiential activity. We can hold on to the idea that experiences are individuated by their phenomenal character, so long as we ensure that we clear that we are individuating types.

I thus propose that we should think of the unity of consciousness as a matter of a single, count-quantifiable stream of consciousness as being composed, at a time, of different types of experiential activity. Just as a single, count-quantifiable statue might be composed of a number of different types of clay, so a single, count-quantifiable stream of consciousness is, at a time, composed of a number of different types of experience.

A single stream of consciousness is a phenomenally continuous stretch of a single subject’s conscious experience that is bounded by periods of unconsciousness (usually sleep). It is these boundaries that confer upon the stream its status as a particular event. In enquiring about the synchronic unity of consciousness, we are asking about what, at a particular moment in time, constitutes this particular stream of consciousness.

For different types of experience to be unified is for them together to compose a single stream of consciousness at a time. This way of thinking of the stream of consciousness does justice to the richness of our mental lives. A number of different types of experiential activity - perceiving, thinking, imagining, desiring - can simultaneously
compose the single stream of consciousness. There is no commitment, on this line of thinking, to excluding different ‘manners of representing’/‘intentional modes’ that may correspond to these various types from the picture. In this way the problem facing Tye’s ‘One Experience’ account can be avoided.

The idea that the stream of consciousness has a fundamentally different ontological profile (admitting count-quantification) from the experiences of which it is composed (which do not) is important because it enables us to avoid the need to posit an experiential ‘unity relation’ - an additional ‘experiential element’ that bears the phenomenal character associated with unity.

On this proposal, experiences are unified when they together, at a time, compose a single stream of consciousness. The stream of consciousness at that time isn’t to be identified with the experiences that compose it, but this isn’t because it possesses some additional phenomenal property (contra Bayne and Dainton). Rather, it is not to be identified with those experiences because it has a different ontological profile: it admits of count-quantification, not mere mass-quantification.

A complete characterisation of ‘what it is like’ for a subject at a time can thus be given by citing all of the experiences (where this plural refers to types) that compose that subject’s stream of consciousness at the time in question. The difference between the stream of consciousness and the experiences that compose it isn’t to be articulated by introducing an extra phenomenal element. Rather, we just need the distinction between the nature of the count-quantifiable stream of consciousness, and the mass-quantifiable experiential activity composing it. For experiences to be unified is for them together to constitute a single count-quantifiable stream of consciousness.

To illustrate the point, consider an analogy with a statue that is composed of a number of different types of clay. These clays might be ‘unified’ together in a single statue, or they might occur separately (perhaps constituting different statues). The difference between a collection of clays (again, the plural refers to types of stuff, not particulars) that are ‘unified’ and a collection that are not isn’t a matter of there being an additional bit of clay-stuff that unifies the clays together. Rather, it is a matter of those merely mass-quantifiable clays together constituting a single count-quantifiable statue.

If, amongst the clay, we look for an extra kind of stuff that makes it into a statue, we won’t find it. However, the statue is not simply identical with the stuff that composes it - for the one admits of count-quantification and the other does not. Likewise, if we look in experience for the extra ‘phenomenal element’ responsible for unity, we won’t find it. But one’s stream of consciousness at a time isn’t to simply be identified
with the conjunction of the experiences that compose it, for streams of consciousness admit of count-quantification, and experiences, qua ongoing experiential activity, do not.

12 Conclusion

I have diagnosed the debate about the phenomenal unity of consciousness as involving three assumptions:

1. A stream of consciousness, at a time, is composed of various experiences.
2. A stream of consciousness, at a time, differs from its constituents only in its phenomenal complexity.
3. Experiences are individuated by their phenomenal character

These assumptions, when combined together, lead to the thought that there must be a distinctive ‘phenomenal unity’ phenomenology possessed by the phenomenally complex stream of consciousness. I have argued that we can avoid the need to posit such phenomenology (which we don’t find when we introspect) by denying the second assumption. The stream of consciousness differs only ontologically, not phenomenally, from its constituents.

References

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