TOWARD A PSYCHOLOGY OF FEELING

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Introduction

Any discussion bearing on consciousness is of course problematised by the difficulty of defining this term. In what follows it will be assumed that consciousness involves mental states, is not a unitary faculty, and although not ontologically reducible to neurobiological states or processes nevertheless critically supervenes upon them. Neurobiological processes are necessary for consciousness but do not exclusively supply its content, some of which is derived from external stimuli. Consciousness is not the same as wakefulness: absence seizures demonstrate wakefulness without consciousness, whilst dreaming may be considered consciousness whilst sleeping. Not being unitary, consciousness may have levels or degrees and so differ qualitatively: not all forms of (un)consciousness are the same.

Whilst other creatures may experience their own forms of consciousness, for psychology our focus most usefully falls upon consciousness in its human form. This focus also has the advantage of allowing us to admit phenomenological evidence to our investigations. Phenomenologically, human consciousness usually appears unitary, seamless and coherent: rarely do we experience breaks, ruptures or unexpected pauses in its flow. Yet despite this apparent unity, human consciousness is also in some sense a hybrid affair, divisible into at least two components. First, it is an embodied consciousness: much of its content consists of an implicit, immediate knowledge of our somatic state: the kinaesthetic sense of our posture and the position of our limbs; the state of our viscera; awareness of hunger, thirst, itch, cramp; awareness of emotional or affective states and their embodied correlates such as heaviness in the limbs, rigidity of the neck and shoulders, a dry mouth or tightness of the facial muscles. Whilst much of this content is typically backgrounded, moving to the forefront of awareness only when some *difference* is registered that makes it pertinent (e.g. a cramp appears, reminding us to change the position of our legs) it is nevertheless typically readily present and always available in an

immediate, non-verbal fashion. And despite this typically "background" character there are situations, such as those of intense pain, where this strand of consciousness dominates to the exclusion of all else.

Second, human consciousness is also a socialised consciousness. By this, I mean that not only its contents but also to some degree its processes are social products, ring-fenced and appropriated elements of the society within which individuals were enculturated. The dual role of language, as both external means of communication and internal medium for deliberation and reflection, clearly illustrates this. Human consciousness has a prominent discursive, narrativised character, occupied by an "inner voice" that unfurls an ongoing narrative of being. Vygotsky (1962) described how elements of this inner voice are acquired developmentally through successive social interactions, wherein the words of influential others are first of all rehearsed aloud and then later repeated non-verbally. Importantly, these socially acquired verbal formulations supply more than just content: by functioning as metacognitive guides, injunctions to accomplish a certain task by (for example) doing this before trying to do that, they eventually become part of the *process* of consciousness. When this happens they retain echoes of their affective tone although they largely shed their verbal form, which is then no longer readily apparent except at times of difficulty. For example, drivers faced with tricky situations may find themselves rehearsing again internally (or even speaking aloud) the guiding words and (hopefully) calming voice of their instructor. Billig (1987) makes a related argument, proposing that the skills of argument, the deployment of rhetoric, the structuring of speech to persuade and direct in order to accomplish desired ends, are also the skills of thought. We learn to think, to deliberate, choose and decide, just as we learn to converse, talk and argue. Recently, Billig (1999) has extended this argument to elements of depth psychology, proposing that Freudian repression is accomplished first of all socially and discursively: that we learn how to repress in thought by first learning how to repress in conversation with others. Gazzaniga (2000; Gazzaniga et al., 1996) proposes that we have a collection of left-brain systems which he calls "the interpreter" that functions to enable the ongoing narrative of being our inner voice provides. His work with split brain patients suggests that the content of this narrative is influenced by both affective states and the demands of situated interaction, and strongly shaped by striving for narrative coherence and legitimacy.

But once we acknowledge the hybrid nature of human consciousness problems of dualism and reductionism instantly threaten to appear. Implicit in the two dimensions of consciousness sketched above are propensities towards such dualistic modes of thinking as mind-body, emotion-reason, individual-society and nature-culture. Such dualisms are cultural commonplaces for us, structuring our thinking and arguing in perhaps unrecognised ways. As the persistence of Cartesian thinking demonstrates, dualisms are difficult to transcend: indeed, just when we think we have addressed one, very often another seems to pop up in its place, albeit in a different form. For example, Harre (2002) proposes a "dissolution" of mind-body dualism by adopting three "grammars" of description and causality: P(ersons), O(rganisms) and M(olecules). Human psychology then appears as the outcome of what people consciously choose to do (P grammar), the influence of their bodies (O grammar), and of substances such as neurotransmitters and

psychoactive drugs (M grammar). He proposes that each of these grammars is necessary, since "Human beings are present to the world and to each other in three forms: as persons, as organisms and as complex clusters of molecules. None of the grammars grounded in these ontologies can be dispensed with, and none can be extended to comprehend the others without incoherence" (Harre, 2002, p. 167)

However, not only do these three grammars map asymmetrically onto mind-body and individual-society dualisms: a further problem may be that the congregation of embodied processes as grammatical achievements might fuel already-existing tendencies to prioritise the discursive and verbal and minify the unspoken and somatic. Thus, dualistic thinking – and with it reductionism - threatens to reappear. So I want to suggest that what is most instructive in Harre's move towards grammars of causality and description is not so much that it may transcend dualisms, but that it flags the utility of not seeing their poles as oppositional, mutually exclusive, and referring to substances with radically different qualities. Rather than treating mind-body, individual society etc. as mutually exclusive oppositional pairs indicative of unresolvable tensions and wholly incommensurable explanations, we might attempt to treat them as necessary and complementary constitutive poles demarcating a problematic terrain of meaning. The explanatory task then involves remaining between these poles, rather than making a comforting rush to one or other of them. On this view, human consciousness is neither of the mind nor of the body, neither individual nor social, neither emotional nor rational: it simultaneously and always contains some degree of both of each pair at one and the same time. Investigating human consciousness as though it were already such a hybrid achievement may offer advantages - not least in repairing some of the omissions and shortcomings flowing from psychology's currently dominant cognitive mode of theorising and research.

Sadly, however, solutions to long-standing problems are rarely so easily achieved. Merely asserting the hybrid status of human consciousness will not resolve problems of incommensurability, nor disinvest existing modes of thinking of their defensive powers of self-replication. A related problem is that in attempting to avoid reductionism by holding open simultaneous paths of causality, such that actions are always caused both by conscious choices and decisions and by the neural process that enable them, we run the risk of failing to produce any coherent explanations at all. For if something is always both this *and* that, asserting so may explain little: if it is both, perhaps it might as well be neither. Hybridity thus opens up a whole other realm of questioning: when is it more this than that, when does this take precedence or causal priority over that, and vice versa and so on. So, to effectively investigate human consciousness psychologists may need to do more than treat dualistic pairs as mutually constitutive (rather than mutually exclusive): they may also need to weigh and measure the relative contribution of each, from moment to moment or situation to situation, assigning greater causal priority sometimes here and sometimes there.

Like dualism, though, hybridity without total symmetry opens up the issue of reductionism. Reductionism at least has the advantage of generating clear explanatory principles, albeit that they may be partial or incomplete (and hence misleading, or even

harmful). Reductionism is like the drunk's lamp-post – useful for support and illumination even though it may not reveal the lost keys, which might be almost anywhere else. Reductionism is no easier to avoid than dualism, and I have no naïve illusions that either my work or that of the theorists I advocate is immune from either of these troubling problems (sophisticated illusions regarding this possibility are of course a different matter). Nevertheless, I want to advocate a way of theorising that attempts to replace the oppositional pairs of mind, body, nature, culture, individual, society, reason and passion with hybridity, which treats each of these in important respects as mutually constitutive of the other. But I further want to propose a nuanced examination of the relative contribution of these different elements at various times such that we may attempt to assert, for a particular event or situation, the priority or relative contribution of one as opposed to the other.

I recognise that this discussion might appear to have spent a thousand or so words returning to the everyday understanding that *of course* influences from both biology and society are important to the psychology of human consciousness. But the discussion is necessary because for the most part psychology is a problematically dualistic discipline – problematic because it operates in ways that appear largely blind to the profound structuring effects of the dualisms that actually shape it. It is also replete with various forms of reductionism – to the organism in biological psychology, to "the cognitive" in many dominant models and theories, and to the "social" in most versions of social psychological theorising. These reductionisms not only reflect and reinforce the dualisms upon which they are founded, they also generate misleading errors of reification and untenable or unresolvable debates (concerning, for example, the possible cognitive bases of phenomena such as "depression"). Given this, to call for a move towards a psychology of feeling without making explicit the terrain of meaning within which this call might be heard would be irresponsible.

In what follows I will sketch Damasio's notion of consciousness which is garnering attention both in neuroscience and beyond - for example, Benson's (2001) treatment of Damasio's work is similar to that proposed here. For Damasio, consciousness includes both somatic-affective and rational-discursive components; my account will also involve some engagement with his "somatic marker" hypothesis. Then I will argue that within this hybridity there are indications that feelings predominate more often than psychology typically recognises, and suggest some sets of circumstances where we might expect this to happen. I will conclude by asking you to consider the consequences for psychology of this view of consciousness.

Damasio: embodied feelings and consciousness

In two related works, Damasio provides both an account of the role of embodied feelings in decision-making (Damasio, 1994) and a theory of consciousness (Damasio, 1999). With regard to feelings, it is important to appreciate the distinction Damasio marks between feeling and emotion. For Damasio, emotions are more-or-less hardwired Ekman-type responses, relatively invariant response modes called out as appropriate to incoming stimuli. These responses do not necessarily enter consciousness – they can be called out

without our recognising them, if for example our limited attention is elsewhere. When we do notice them, though, it is as feelings, feedback from the body as it moves into a particular state profile. So emotions are body-brain states, whereas feelings are the phenomenological experience of those states. But feelings for Damasio also include "secondary emotions", responses that are enculturated rather than hardwired, and also a broader, more subtle, continuous sense of the embodied state of our bodies which Damasio terms "background emotion". As with primary emotions, these other forms of feedback are always available to consciousness but are not necessarily attended to if other stimuli are focal.

With regard to consciousness, Damasio distinguishes between "core consciousness" and "extended consciousness" (although the consciousness we experience usually consists of both forms working together). Core consciousness is primary and non-verbal, consisting of feelingful images of the body and sensory images of the environment, and is a necessary precondition for extended consciousness. It is an immediate, "automatic" awareness of one's embodied state in the moment-by-moment flow of being in the world, generated as stimuli impinge upon the body-brain system. In neural terms, core consciousness is a second-order map. This in turn rests upon a first order map that Damasio calls the proto-self, a dynamic representation of the body and its current state constantly updated in real time and rooted, evolutionarily, in the machinery of homeodynamics. Changes to the proto-self may be caused either by internal body-brain changes or by external influences impinging upon the person. In both cases, these changes generate a second-order map, the contents of which are *the experience of the body-brain system being changed*. So core consciousness is not the proto-self – it is the representation of changes in the proto-self, the *difference* between the proto-self in first one state and then a subsequent one. Whilst we are awake these changes occur in a ceaseless flux, each succeeding the other in rapid succession. Changes generate pulses of core consciousness, the contents of which are representations of the change that has occurred.

So, core consciousness is awareness of the body-brain system in its state of flux. It is fundamentally non-verbal and extra-linguistic in character. It consists of images of the organism being changed, transformed or moved by something, but these images are not linguistic devices or narrative elements. Although Damasio refers to core consciousness as a narrative of existence, he is explicit that the narrative here is not a verbal one. Core consciousness is jointly and immediately sensory and feelingful, consisting of sounds, images, sensations (heat, wind, texture, pressure) and feelings (both primary and secondary emotions, and less specific feelings such as those consequent upon changes in the activity of the viscera, postural changes or the effects of muscular tension).

Extended consciousness, by contrast, is symbolic, representational, narrativised and discursive, it is both reliant upon and constructed through memory and language. It uses the uniquely developed human capacity for memory and symbolic representation, primarily through language, to generate webs of meaning and understanding within which to locate the ever-present flux of information supplied by core consciousness. Thus, in extended consciousness stimuli first registered in core consciousness very

rapidly gain their full human meaning and significance, black marks on a white background become words on paper that carry a particular instruction or idea, such as the one you are contemplating as you read this. This happens (almost) immediately as you process either incoming external stimuli or changes in your body-brain system: each generates a new pulse of core-consciousness which produces, in networks of spreading neural activation, a richly detailed, meaningful and fully human understanding of whatever has just occurred. Extended consciousness, then, requires extensive memory resources and the capacity for symbolic representation in order to produce the uniquely human capacity for reflection, questioning, analysis, understanding and meaning.

So, extended consciousness is secondary to and parasitic upon core consciousness. Changes to the body-brain system generate pulses of core consciousness, an immediate awareness of our embodied situation. These pulses activate other neural circuits, calling out language and memories which thoroughly endow these embodied or sensory events with meaning. This means that it is possible to have core consciousness without extended consciousness, but not vice versa. Evidence for this view comes from studies of the effects of brain lesions, and from neuroanatomy. It may also be supported by analysis of the progress of degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's, in which the progressive fragmentation and breakdown of extended consciousness gradually strips away the person's ability to make meaning and locate events within narrative webs. However, core consciousness which is primary survives longer, and so there remains a residual core awareness of body-brain changes passing over and through the organism - but the ability to generate significance and properly locate these within their human, social context is gradually impaired and eventually disappears.

Damasio (1994) also proposes that how we feel, our experience of our bodies, is not simply a matter of biology: to an extent, our feelings themselves are also structured by experience, they are socialised within the particular life trajectory we have lived. Clearly, this socialisation will include both the "display rules" for primary emotions and the acquisition of appropriate repertoires of secondary emotions within particular moral orders. However, for Damasio it includes the impact of experience upon the full range of feelings he marks as important, so it also encompasses influences upon the more subtle "background" emotions. All these somatic states, by associative learning, get coupled with particular mental images, social situations, or external physical stimuli such as an evocative taste or smell. Memories of experiences do not only take the form of images, sounds or tastes: they also take the form of feelings, the body state profiles that accompanied or were called out in response to these experiences. The acquisition of such embodied memories occurs developmentally, but the process does not end with childhood since new associations between stimuli or mental states and somatic profiles can always be made.

Moreover, when in future we consider choices, feelings that in the past were associated with similar options may get fleetingly reconstituted, called out by feedback loops between brain and body. As we consider our choices, these feelings then tag each possibility with positive or negative valences (according to the kind of feeling it induces). Damasio calls such reconstituted feelings "somatic markers", and his work with brain

injured people suggests that they play a vital role in decision-making, especially in social settings. Somatic markers influence decision making by making some options seem more viable or attractive, or alternatively by directing attention away from less favorable options and making them seem non-viable, unthinkable. They do not make decisions for us, but they do simplify and accelerate the process by shrinking the response set we have to consider. In doing so, however, they may introduce patterns of bias and apparent irrationality into our actions, patterns which we ourselves might only notice retrospectively. So somatic markers have their origins in our pasts, but their influence stretches forward into the future because they structure the viable possibilities we perceive, and so influence the choices we make.

Of course, things are significantly more complicated than these descriptions imply. The account of Damasio's work presented here is greatly simplified, and there are both feedback loops and links to other brain systems which add layers of complexity. For example, because images appearing even briefly in extended consciousness are also changes in the body-brain system they too can subsequently be registered in core consciousness, where they may induce feelings. So although core consciousness is primary in the sense that it is always necessary for extended consciousness to be enabled, the flow of influence is not one way. Images in extended consciousness (the significances of things said, perhaps, or of a rediscovered flower found between the pages of a book) may generate further pulses of core consciousness, the contents of which may be affect laden or feelingful (according to the kinds of embodied state profiles with which the evoked images were previously associated).

Toward a psychology of feeling

Damasio's notion of consciousness seems to have the requisite hybrid character that might allow us to avoid both simplistic dualism and naïve reductionism. Core consciousness is of the body, sensory and feelingful, not reliant upon words; extended consciousness is organized and structured by memory and language, and so is social and individual at the same time. Although core consciousness has primacy in the sense that it comes first, and is necessary, extended consciousness can feed back into core consciousness. Thoughts, memories and words in extended consciousness can induce feelings in core consciousness, which in turn may feed forward into further states of extended consciousness for interpretation in memory and language. So, there is a recursive relationship between the two: some of the current contents of core consciousness may have been produced by the immediately prior contents of extended consciousness, and might in turn produce a new state of extended consciousness which, in *its* turn, calls out another pulse of core consciousness for subsequent interpretation.

Importantly, Damasio's work includes an account of feelings as *socialized*, and not just the outcome of embodied and neural processes. In this regard it challenges both dualism and reductionism concerning the role and status of the body in everyday life and thought. Somatic markers are bodily responses called out in response to stimuli, but in accord with prior socialization, making it difficult to sustain any rigid demarcation between individual

and society with regard to embodied experience. In accord with the work of social theorists such as Elias (1978), Bourdieu (1977) and Young (1990), Damasio recognizes that our embodiment is not simply given by biology but also modified by experience. We live through our bodies, and hence experience them, partly in accord with the strictures, injunctions and legitimations we encounter – especially, but not only, those we encounter in our early years.

Moreover, in Damasio's work these socialized feelings then play an important role in decision-making. When somatic markers direct our attention away from one option and towards another, the discursive rationality of our "inner voice" is being influenced by feelingful, non-discursive processes. It is vital to recognize that Damasio views this as normal, not aberrant: like many emotion theorists, he views feelings as adaptive responses to situations and recognises that they typically enhance, rather than diminish, our ability to decide in our own best interests. But in granting feelingful and socialized responses from the body such an important role in rational decision-making, he situates cognition not only in the body but also within the trajectory of socialization individuals have experienced. Thus, Damasio's ideas appear consonant with a view of mind, body, emotion, reason, nature and culture as mutually constitutive of a hybrid consciousness. Human consciousness is a kind of *felt thinking* wherein affect and feeling co-constitute, orient and give motivational flavour to the quasi-discursive, socially-shaped flow of "inner speech" which is its most prominent moment-by-moment element.

However, within the relatively seamless flow of felt thinking, Damasio's work also suggests that psychologists should give a nuanced and balanced priority to feelings, rather than cognitions. There are both general and specific senses in which this claim may be true. Generally, it seems that within this felt thinking a feelingful, affect laden mode of engagement remains the "default" mode of human consciousness. This mode of thought does not need to be taught or acquired, like language does. Affective, feelingful states are notoriously difficult to either induce (we can't make ourselves fall in love because we think it's a good idea) or remove (we can't stop ourselves feeling sad by wanting to, either). Indeed, the recognition we give to highly skilled theatrical performers demonstrates that affective states are extremely difficult even to fake convincingly. This is presumably because, in the recursive flow of influence from core consciousness to extended consciousness, core consciousness must always come first. To the extent that pre-existing images in core consciousness are feelingful (rather than sensory) they will predominate over those in extended consciousness, which are called out by them. Whilst extended consciousness may then call out further states of core consciousness, the pre-existing state of core consciousness will still influence these. In our felt thinking, then, there is a general sense in which *feelings* may come first.

Specifically, it is possible to describe situations and experiences where this default mode is likely to predominate. Of course, this does not mean that in other situations thinking is not affect laden: thinking is *always* felt thinking, even when feelings do not hold our attention or dominate our decisions. And conversely, just because there are situations where affect might predominate, this does not mean that it will do so in a 'thought-free' manner: we can always confabulate, to ourselves and others, in order to justify

(“rationalize”) our choices. Nor should the identification of such circumstances be taken to imply that situations can be definitively classified by objective observers according to their stimulus features or relational character: participants’ views always diverge somewhat from those of observers, and the individual meanings we make, derived from the trajectories of experience we have lived, are always influential. So the following list is indicative rather than prescriptive, suggestive rather than definitive. It is a minimal inventory of circumstances wherein, for most people, it is unlikely that rational, discursive deliberation typically provides an effective guide to action.

1. When feelings are running particularly high: “crimes of passion”, arguments, highly charged situations, many forms of pathological distress

2. Novel situations where existing rational-discursive forms can’t easily be applied and new forms have not yet evolved, or are unavailable: rapid social upheaval or transformation; crowds in panic situations, such as a fire alarm in a large public building; elements of riots.

3. When numerous competing logics or ways of reasoning predicated upon possibly incommensurable assumptions are available, such that there is no one rational way to decide between them: complex social policy decisions made by governments, development strategies formulated by large organizations or businesses

4. Whenever there is a shortage of information by which to evaluate options, making rational consideration difficult.

5. Where there is an organic or developmental inability to reason successfully: people with intellectual impairments, children.

6. When extreme pressure of time and multiple options to consider mean that thorough interrogation and assessment of implications is not possible before a choice has to be made: emergencies, strategic choices in some sports

7. Open ended-situations, where each decision feeds forward into future decisions and conditions the subsequent possibilities that ensue, such that rational calculation of consequences is time consuming or impossible. Damasio’s work with brain-injured people illustrates how these circumstances characterize many everyday social interactions, for example choosing a date for a future appointment.

CONCLUSION

The variety of situations encompassed by this list is indicative of the range of convenience of the ideas summarized here, and so of the possible implications for

psychology if Damasio's ideas are correct. And of course, even if Damasio is discounted, other bodies of work would point to similar conclusions: Zajonc (1980, 1984), and most psychoanalytically trained thinkers, would endorse similar conclusions. And finally, it must be emphasized in closing that none of this is to discount or deny rationality its role in human life. Rather, it does at least two things to rationality: first, it suggests limits to its operation in everyday life; and second, it suggests that even the clearest, purest rationality is also, simultaneously, an affective state – it is the particular rationality that *feels* best for that moment.

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