

Introduction

I don't know about you, but I suppose you are a person like me; that you have thoughts and feelings and experiences as I do; that these are *your* experiences that *you* know about. And I would call these features *consciousness*. Consciousness is how it is for us to live this life of ours, so it is a person's subjective experience; it is *psychological*. Consciousness is about how we share our world and what we have in common one with another, so although it is *my* conscious experience or *your* conscious experience, it is also *our* conscious experience; it is a *social psychological* feature of people's lives. We do things in this shared world about us and these acts have an impact on our lives and the lives of others, so we live in a world of people and relationships. We may come to take responsibility for this because we not only know consciously what we do, we can also reflect beforehand on what we will do and its impact. Over time, we may commit to people and perhaps to ideas. We can know consciously and act freely.

I want to think through the implications of this interpretation of consciousness and ask what this means for us not as a final explanation, but as a way station that may help us make a start on some big issues: issues of how we treat one another and ourselves, and issues to do with those things we most take for granted. In a sense the very character of consciousness that I am setting out calls for reflection on our life and living.

I accept this is a very partial work: I am making a selection and dealing with this selectively. The idea is to take the space to go slowly over the research work I have carried out.

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The research background: the genre of captivity

I wanted to research imagination but I couldn't think how to do it. While I was doing my degree in psychology in the 1990s I came across an account of solitary confinement written by Joseph Kovach, I believe.¹ The title was 'Freedom through mental activity' and in it the author described how he had survived his time as a political prisoner, in what was the Soviet Union, by his use of imagination. At once I could see how the research I wanted to do could be done. I would research the experiences of those who had been held in solitary confinement as a way of researching the use of imagination. And that is what I did.

At first it was imagination that was the focus, but as I worked I found that the wider field of consciousness added to my interest, and still does. Also, in the early stages the stories of captivity were the backdrop to help me understand imagination; but as I got interested in this extraordinary body of work, I found myself bringing captivity to the foreground of the research project.

Accounts of captivity are legion: the prison writings of former political prisoners and hostages that make up a body of work deserve to be called a 'genre'.² I read extensively from the genre of captivity and I wrote to former captives asking to meet them. I met and interviewed four former captives.

Two of the conclusions I drew from the research are relevant to this book. The first is that *we are made from the lives of others*. Consciousness is made from the social interactions made by others with us in early life and by the exchanges we make with others as we get older. In captivity, we make a virtual social world in order to sustain ourselves. I will say how I think this is done and how I think this has a bearing on the life we lead. The second is that *consciousness is polyphonic*. Consciousness consists in features running next to each other (as well as the more usual configuration of a continuous, sequential, one-after-another conscious mental life). By polyphonic, what is meant is that consciousness has many

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things going on at the same time. The many things going on side by side simultaneously compose our acts of consciousness and conscience. Far from being a different kind of existence, captivity turns down the volume of ordinary life and living and serves to amplify our humanity. It is unsurprising that books written by former hostages and political prisoners are so successful. They speak to us about who and what we are.

Under conditions of solitary confinement where little or nothing is happening, everything rests on the psychological life of the captive, how they deal with their situation. And I came to see this situation as something that could stand in for conscious life and living because it pared down a person to all that there is when there is nothing else. When a person is separated from those they love and know, from everything they would normally do, and from the world of events, what is left is what a person is.

It may seem as if this is a topsy-turvy standpoint where I've turned things on their heads, but studying what something is *not* in order to study what something is has had other successes. In fact, studying things directly rarely works. I came to see how studying captivity was studying how we are free and that by studying a person in isolation I was studying what it was to be a person in relation to our world.

This book is a series of investigations about consciousness that takes apart the world about us and how it seems to us to be, and puts it back together again differently. I will be using three stories that have been much discussed in the field of consciousness studies as a means of investigation. The stories will allow me to discuss various features of consciousness such as subjective experience, point of view and knowing what we know.

I am a realist social psychologist who believes that the world about us really exists. I believe we contribute to the world about us that makes us who and what we are. I believe we are minded and capable of consciously knowing and acting with conscience. I believe we are persons in our own right. Persons are

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mind to act. Persons make the world about us as it is by leading lives the way they do. I believe that we are neither alone nor can we accomplish anything in isolation from others: life and living is about doing things together even if others are in the form of remembered conversations, or books, or films or other times and places in which we do things with others. We are fundamentally social in character and this is indivisible. If we break this, we really do disintegrate and there's no person left. I believe we are made from other people and speak others' voices in our own; it is our own voice, but it is always resonant with the voices of others. This isn't a contradiction in terms, but any other explanation would be.

How the book is set out

This book is in three parts that selectively focus on something that has come to characterise consciousness. These three parts are anchored on three stories; these are sometimes called 'thought experiments'. A thought experiment is a way of testing an idea where it would be unethical or impossible to carry out an actual experiment. To test the ideas, it is important to try to imagine what is said in the set-up of the basic story. We should try to imagine what the philosopher supposes in the way that they set it up even though parts of the set-up may seem ludicrous. The idea is to think through what follows from the set-up as if it could be really carried out. This might lead us to form certain conclusions and think that these are obvious. So, the idea is then to think of how the set-up might be systematically varied to see where our ordinary beliefs get in the way of a fair test. I want to focus selectively on features of life and living that seem common to all of us even if our appreciation of them varies. Necessarily, I'll be taking a particular viewpoint, but this should allow you something to lean against so that you may test the worldview you hold.

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The three stories

The three thought experiments or stories have been much discussed in debates about consciousness and in the field of consciousness studies. I have put references in the further reading so that you can follow the ideas back to the original papers if you wish, although it isn't necessary to do so in order to follow discussions in this book. I will give sufficient background in the text. I don't claim to be able to unpick all that these papers allude to. I'm not a philosopher and these are difficult papers, containing much that probably goes right past me. But I think difficulty should not be a bar to us, particularly when they offer such an engaging way into examining consciousness. You might be able to access the original papers online and I give some suggestions for websites, but of course these may have changed since this book was published. As the originals were written by philosophers, you might find them a little hard to follow, but if you do wish to get the general idea of the originals, I would encourage you to reread rather than give up. There is often a lot of insight in a philosophical paper, but it may take some careful reading and rereading to get the idea. It does for me. I will try to put the stories and discussions in plain English, but this will change the stories in ways that follow interpretations I am interested in. By changing the stories at all, it is likely to mean that some of the complexity of the original papers will be lost. I found these stories rewarding because they forever throw up questions that test our familiar world. And it is in this spirit that I invite you to join my discussions of the three stories. As far as possible when reading this book, try to keep these stories in mind. I will be referring to them, but even when I do not do this directly, the stories and your familiarity with them will help you get the idea of what I am saying.

Part I takes the story of an imagined teleporter – in science fiction, a teleporter is a futuristic machine that can instantly transport you from one place to another – and examines questions about

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Guy Saunders

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being a person and how it is for us *to be conscious*. The story is taken from a thought experiment devised by Derek Parfit.³

Chapter 1 sets out the basic story and also some variations. The main feature of consciousness discussed in this chapter is what it means to be a *person*. Chapter 2 addresses questions raised by the thought experiment asking not only who am I but also what, when and where am I? I will introduce the idea of *negative shapes, spaces and contours* as an alternative way we can conceive of ourselves as persons. We will examine variations on ‘to be’ such as the sense of self, memory and identity as, for example, in a discussion of the film *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Chapter 3 takes a first look at the genre of captivity and asks what is it *to be captive*? How does a person sustain themselves in solitary confinement? What do they do to stop themselves from psychologically disintegrating? I will quote from interviews I carried out with former captives, so that you can hear their voices in this discussion, and to make a case for the importance of the lives of others even when we are separated from other people. The idea of *polyphony* will be introduced here.

Part II takes the story told by Thomas Nagel that asks the extraordinary question, ‘What is it like to be a bat?’⁴ In this part we examine what it is *to have conscious experience*. This includes our sense of ‘point of view’; the sense that we are located in our time and place (and *this* body). I will introduce some ideas associated with a movement in painting called *Cubism* and from which I have coined the term *Cubist Psychology*.⁵ The mind–body problem is outlined in the introduction to Part II. Chapter 4 directly deals with the thought experiment about bats and examines what it is to have a worldview. Chapter 5 examines treatments in the arts concerning experience, point of view and mind; we discuss films such as *Being John Malkovich*, *Blade Runner* and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. This chapter also has a brief discussion of the novel and how novelists have dealt with the idea of conscious subjective experience. Chapter 6 returns to my research work on captivity and examines the captive’s mind.

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Part III tackles what it means to know consciously and deals with issues such as Theory of Mind and reflexivity; these are discussed in the introduction and throughout. Chapter 7 examines the idea of 'landscape and the world about us'. Chapter 8 takes the story of 'Mary the colour scientist'. The story is taken from a thought experiment devised by the philosopher Frank Jackson. We examine a variation devised by me as a way to explore how it is to be free. Chapter 9 takes the song 'I wish I knew how it would feel to be free' as a medium for discussing all that's been discussed so far in the book: how it is to be conscious, to have conscious experience and to know consciously. This chapter includes further commentary on the genre of captivity.

The Conclusions chapter pulls the book together around the main themes of captivity/freedom, acts of consciousness and conscience, person/mind/world and Cubist Psychology.

The Notes pages that follow the final chapter contain the endnotes from each raised figure shown in the book. After these, there is a section with comments on recommended further reading, viewing and listening. This is followed by a list of references to films, paintings and other artworks, and a bibliography, which gives a full reference for all of the sources I have used. Finally, there is an index of subject matter and author names with the page numbers where these occur, so that you can easily look up a particular idea or particular people.

How the book is written

This book is written in the form of returning loops so that we're never far from readdressing matters that came up earlier or turning our attention forwards to matters still to come. These loops are not simply repetitions; they are opportunities to return to an issue from another direction. You may need to read some parts twice because material placed later may help with material placed earlier. Earlier chapters tend to be longer

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because they include extra material explaining key terms, which are referred to later in the book.

I will try to write plainly and explain any jargon as we go along. Writing plainly will also mean using everyday language and expressions that mean some readers may start reading into this book interpretations that are unintended. For example, the word ‘thing’ or ‘something’ is one such useful word that could be misinterpreted as meaning an object, particularly a separate object distinct from other objects.⁶ Sometimes plain English can make it seem as if I am talking about consciousness as a thing when I am just using convenient everyday language.

It might look as if the distinctions I make between, for example, inside and outside are intended to convey a division between two things. I don’t mean to imply a division as I take the distinctions only to be helpful ways of characterising how things seem for us. The twofold way of talking that most of us use ordinarily is not a problem in itself; it helps us to say what we mean because we can make distinctions between this and that. Dividing the world into how it seems to be only becomes a problem if we believe that the world really is divided up and that the twofold way we talk about this and that really depicts how the world is. Sometimes, the way languages are structured seems to imply that there really are sets of opposites that represent real and distinct separate categories of existence. In order for me to speak plainly about consciousness, sometimes it may seem as if I’m saying the world is really divided into two on any subject, when I do not believe this to be the case.⁷ In most examples that I will discuss I will say that there are many ways of characterising rather than simply two.

The idea in this book is to discuss issues slowly and at length so that the sense of what I am saying is eventually conveyed. Where I am unable to do this it is largely because I do not understand the issue well enough myself. And these paragraphs will contain the most important three and a half words I know: ‘I don’t

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know.’ Where possible, I will say why I am unable to explain further or where I think others may have a better grasp on an issue, but also where I don’t think anyone knows.

Much of what follows has been written about elsewhere and some of the sources are listed at the back. I find that much of the discussion seems to stop at the point where it most needs to go on to say more. For example, the development of us as persons is discussed and sometimes explained, but not what a person can do as a person. I’ll point towards contributions that have fed my thinking. You can read this book without looking up the notes; they are mostly there to refer to further reading and sometimes give more background details about the point just made. For example, many of the notes acknowledge a source for what has just been discussed. Although this book is aimed at the interested layperson, some readers may want to see my sources and so place my work in relation to the academic field to which it contributes. Some readers may wish to follow up my main sources, so I have also included a short section of recommended further reading together with some remarks about each one.

There are some terms that I have found it difficult to do without and these will be illustrated with an example either when they are first mentioned or where I think an explanation best fits.

Some of us have got used to using the plural ‘them’ when ‘he’ or ‘she’ would seem to be grammatically correct. The idea is not to use pronouns for male and female because use of either is clearly exclusive and use of both as in ‘he/she’ is off-putting. I know some readers will be offended by the use of ‘them’ and ‘their’ as singular pronouns, but I think it is more important that my book is inclusive and that most readers get plain English.

I am at a point in my life and work where it seems the more I learn the more I find myself saying I don’t know, but I have some ideas. This book focuses on what can be said about the living of this life of ours, and, as such, it touches on the *meaning* of life in its discussion of the *manner* of life and living and what it is to

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have conscious experience. I would like to think some ideas in my book might be important for all of us, but I am well aware of the problems caused by many in what writers have already written on these matters: I have no wish to add to the pile of supposedly expert texts. I will argue *for* this contribution rather than against others. By putting one clear voice and set of ideas, the reader can try out and test out their views against mine. And this is only possible by taking a clear position. More than one view can have merit in a complex field of study like consciousness. My aim is to add to the field. Much of what follows may be a kind of madness dressed up as an interesting discussion, but I will let others be the judge of that and just get on with it.