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Unity of Consciousness and Other Mental Unities

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1. Introduction

Though there has been a huge resurgence of interest in consciousness in the past decade, little attention has been paid to what the philosopher Immanuel Kant and others call the *unity of consciousness*. The unity of consciousness takes different forms, as we will see, but the general idea is that each of us is aware of many things in the world at the same time, and often many of one's own mental states and of oneself as their single common subject, too.

Indeed, unities of consciousness are far from being the only mental unities. There are also unities on the 'input' side of consciousness and cognition, unities that consist of integration of motivating factors, cognitive capacities, etc., and unities on the 'output' side, unities that consist of integration of behaviour.

The purpose of this short sketch of some of the most important mental unities is to try to delineate the main kinds and say a bit about each of them.

2. Cognitive Unity

One of the more striking things about human beings as cognitive systems is that we can bring an extremely wide range of factors to bear on a cognitive situation, a situation in which we have to characterize something or reach a decision about what to do about something. Consider just how wide the range is. We can bring to bear: what we want; what we believe; our attitudes to self, situation, and context; input from each of our various senses; information about the situation, other people, others' beliefs, desires, attitudes, etc.; the resources of however many languages we have available to us; the various kinds of memory; bodily sensations; various problem-solving skills we have acquired; and so on. Not only can we bring all these elements to bear, we can integrate them in a way that is highly structured and ingeniously appropriate to the situation before us and what we would like to achieve. Let us call this form of mental unity *cognitive unity*.

3. The Unities of Consciousness

In addition to cognitive unity, there are some unities specific to consciousness in its different forms. By 'consciousness' I will mean both sentience, awareness of one's environment and perhaps of one's body as an element of that environ-

ment, and two different forms of consciousness of self: consciousness of one's own psychological states, and consciousness of oneself as the thing whose states they are (for more on this terminology, see Brook 1994, Ch. 3).

These forms of consciousness display at least three distinct forms of unity. Let us call them *unity of consciousness*, *unity of focus*, and *unified consciousness of self*.

i. Unity of consciousness Unity of consciousness starts from the intuitive idea that we are aware of a great many things at once. Here is a better definition:

The unity of consciousness =df. (i) a representing in which (ii) a number of representations and/or objects of representation are combined in such a way that to be aware of any of these representations is also to be aware of other representations as connected to it and of the whole as a single complex representation.

ii. Unity of focus We are able to focus on a number of considerations at the same time—desires, beliefs, alternatives, probabilities, etc. and apply them all together to the available alternatives. We can then bring them together to choose courses of action. We can then focus our behaviour and resources on carrying out the choice, in the face of obstacles, conflicting desires, and so forth. Unity of focus is something more than unified consciousness.

iii. Unified consciousness of self Finally, each of us is aware of him- or herself throughout these unified fields of representation and deliberation as the single subject and agent of them all.

4. Unity of Behaviour

Finally, our behaviour displays a distinctive form of unity. In doing the actions we do, we coordinate our limbs, eyes, bodily attitude, etc., indeed in ways the precision and complexity of which would be difficult to exaggerate. Think, for example, of a concert pianist performing a complicated concerto.

These five forms of mental unity and others if any would be worthy objects of cognitive science's attention.

Reference

Brook, A. 1994. *Kant and the Mind*. Cambridge University Press.