

## Preface

I have two aims in this book. First, I aim to persuade you that people in general know very little about what might seem to be obvious features of their stream of conscious experience—where by “conscious experience” I mean sensory experience, visual imagery, inner speech, emotional experience, and the whole variety of subjective phenomena that constitute what we sometimes think of as our inner lives. Second, I aim to persuade you that you yourself know very little about such matters. Obviously, these two aims intertwine and support each other. My scholarly emphasis is on the general claim, but I’ve found in the course of writing these chapters that I care at least as much about the reader’s conception of his or her own self-knowledge. I want to undermine your self-confidence. I want to make it seem not obvious to you where the truth lies on various issues you might have thought straightforward.

Currently ongoing conscious experience—what contemporary philosophers of mind call *phenomenology*—might seem a singularly unpromising topic for doubt. Even Descartes in his first two *Meditations* and Hume in the first book of his *Treatise*, despite their great talent for skepticism, couldn’t bring themselves to doubt such matters. Both thought, or appear to have thought, that no matter how great our errors may be about the outside world, we can’t err in the same way about the current contents of our own consciousness. I might not know whether there is a red tomato in front of me (maybe I’m being systematically deceived in my sensory inputs by some powerful being), but I know for sure what the character of my *visual experience* of that tomato is—that I *seem* to be seeing a red thing, in this hue or hues, in this shape, over this apparent distance. Likewise, if a prankster has made a clever swap, I may be wrong about having dropped a barbell on my toe, but surely I cannot be wrong about the severe pain I now feel. The Western philosophical tradition is nearly univocal on the special privilege, or at least excellent accuracy, of our knowledge of our

currently ongoing stream of experience. Though Sigmund Freud, Richard Nisbett, and many others have embarrassed us with our errors about *some* features of our minds, such as our motives and traits, most philosophers have thought that nonetheless current conscious experience is a special aspect of the mind about which our knowledge is remarkably secure.

The chapters of this book are not cumulative; with the exception of chapter 7 (and the partial exception of chapter 5), each serves as a kind of case study of our ignorance in some particular domain. As case studies, they can be read in any order. I recommend starting with the topic you find most interesting. Chapter 7 is the most general statement and defense of my pessimism; it draws force from three brief case studies embedded within it and, more powerfully I hope, from the more detailed case studies that constitute the bulk of the book. The chapters sometimes become descents into confusion, with no clear final thesis but rather a tossing up of the hands; you will either share my uncertainty or think I'm dense.

I will not have much to say about the *metaphysics* of consciousness—the question of whether we are purely material beings, and if so what aspect of materiality is responsible for the stream of conscious experience. I am, however, skeptical about metaphysical accounts of consciousness too. In part this is because I think it became evident in the late twentieth century (if it wasn't evident earlier) that all metaphysical accounts of consciousness will have some highly counterintuitive consequences if confronted frankly. (If functionalism is true, some weird assemblages with the right functional properties will be conscious; if consciousness depends on the stuff we're made of, then aliens behaviorally indistinguishable from us might nonetheless be totally unconscious; and so on.) *Something* apparently preposterous, it seems, must be true of consciousness. Thus, our ordinary untutored intuitions cannot be a reliable guide to what kinds of systems are conscious, nor is there any evolutionary or developmental reason to think that they would be a reliable guide. Furthermore, we appear to have no solid basis for choosing among the various metaphysical alternatives: Armchair philosophical reflection leaves us only idiosyncratic hunches about equally unsupported half-intuitive theories, while empirical observation of physical structure and behavior is uninterpretable—cannot be accepted as showing the presence or absence of conscious experience—without a prior theory of consciousness, creating a tight vicious circle. (For more on this last point, see chapter 6.)

Nothing important in this book, I hope, turns on a complex, abstract philosophical argument. History has not been kind to such arguments; evidently the cognitive powers of even the best philosophers are generally

too frail for such arguments to help them gain much purchase on the truth. The problem does not generalize across fields: Complex mathematical and scientific arguments do often survive scrutiny. The difficulty, I suspect, is principally in the background assumptions, which are more easily agreed upon by mathematicians and scientists than by philosophers, and which are too shaky in the case of philosophy to support grand edifices.

Jakob Hohwy has pointed out to me three recurring structures in my skeptical reflections. The argument types are simple enough, I hope, and employed often enough with different examples, to support my overall perspective even if several particular examples fail. First is the *argument from variation*: People often differ greatly in their judgments about their stream of experience (across cultures, between individuals within the same culture, or within the same individual over time). Sometimes, in such cases, it seems unlikely that their actual underlying experiences vary correspondingly. Consequently, some of their judgments—we don't necessarily know which ones—are probably wrong. Second is the *argument from error*: Ordinary people often think that their experience has some feature that more careful introspection, perhaps combined with other evidence, suggests it does not have. Ordinary reflection, in such cases, is therefore prone to error. Third is the *argument from uncertainty*: When instructed to reflect carefully and asked probing questions, people often find they feel uncertain about even the most basic aspects of their stream of experience. Such doubt suggests a substantial possibility of error in judgments of that general type, not only when people are reflecting carefully and are asked probing questions but also when they are reflecting more casually. I ask you not to evaluate these arguments now. I wouldn't expect you to find them compelling, independent of detailed examples. I am merely noting their general form, which may be of help in understanding the argumentative structure of the book.

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Chapter 1 descends from “Why Did We Think We Dreamed in Black and White?” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 33 (2002): 649–660. Chapter 2 descends from “Do Things Look Flat?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72 (2006): 589–599. Chapter 3 descends from “How Well Do We Know Our Own Conscious Experience? The Case of Visual Imagery,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 9 (2002, no. 5–6): 35–53. Chapter 4 descends from “How Well Do We Know Our Own Conscious Experience? The Case of Human Echolocation” (with Michael S. Gordon), *Philosophical Topics* 28 (2000): 235–246. Chapter 5 descends from “Introspective Training Apprehensively Defended: Reflections on Titchener’s Lab Manual,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 11 (2004, no. 7–8): 58–76. Chapter 6 descends from “Do You Have Constant Tactile Experience of Your Feet in Your Shoes? Or Is Experience Limited to What’s in Attention?” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 14 (2007, no. 3): 5–35. Chapter 7 descends from “The Unreliability of Naive Introspection,” *Philosophical Review* 117 (2008): 245–273.