CRITICAL STUDY

O'SHAUGHNESSY'S CONSCIOUSNESS

By A.D. Smith


It should come as little surprise to readers familiar with O'Shaughnessy's previous book The Will (Cambridge UP, 1980) to be told that this latest offering is a splendid work. Here once again we have a treatment that is remarkable for its depth, breadth and originality. Some readers may be disappointed by the lack of much explicit discussion of the pertinent writings of other authors; but I for one feel more than compensated by the grand unfolding of O'Shaughnessy's own thought. The central topic of the work is the nature of consciousness. Despite his sympathy with physicalism, this is not, thank heavens, yet another attempt at a physicalistic reduction of the mind. Such metaphysical issues barely surface in this work. What we are presented with, rather, is an immanent reflection on the nature of consciousness itself. More precisely, O'Shaughnessy is interested in the relation between consciousness and perception. He has an original understanding of this relation, partly because he construes the term 'consciousness' in a somewhat unusual way, expounded at length in part I of the book. Part II concerns itself with attention, a phenomenon that plays a central role in O'Shaughnessy's theory, for reasons we shall see. Part III contains a theory of visual perception. And part IV is concerned with tactile perception and the awareness we have of our own bodies. Since this last part consists of but two chapters, one of which is a reprint of an already published paper while the other recapitulates, with small modifications, a longer treatment in The Will, I shall not discuss it – though for readers unfamiliar with O'Shaughnessy's views on these matters, I should say that his discussions are of major importance in the field.

Consciousness

When most philosophers speak of a person's being conscious, they mean that the subject is enjoying some experience or other. This is not how O'Shaughnessy understands the term. For him, consciousness means awake consciousness – something
lacking not only in those who are totally unconscious or non-conscious, but also in those who are dreaming. So although having some form of experience is necessary in order to be conscious, it is not sufficient: for the latter, a certain type of experience is necessary. One of the chief purposes of part I is to anatomize what O'Shaughnessy, perhaps somewhat confusingly, calls the various 'states of consciousness'. This is potentially confusing because unconsciousness is a state of consciousness in this sense, and sleep is another, though in neither is one 'conscious' in the usual sense of being awake. The justification for the terminology, however, is that these other 'states of consciousness' are 'privative derivatives' from that central state which is waking consciousness. We do not regard a stone as unconscious in the way a comatose subject is. Such a subject, like a sleeping subject, is to be seen as in one way or another deprived of certain functions that hang together in the fully awake. Any sentient being is in some state of consciousness at any time, and in only one.

Perhaps the most original and fascinating aspect of O'Shaughnessy’s discussion is his claim that the various states of consciousness prescribe the kind of mental life enjoyed by a subject who is in these states. One of his central concerns is to show how the phenomena that characterize a certain type of state of consciousness 'hang together'. One should not, according to him, merely reflect on what is involved in being consciously awake, for example, and then suppose that the term ‘waking consciousness’ simply stands for what results when we add these various mental phenomena together. It is rather that such a state of consciousness has its own intrinsic nature, which it is O'Shaughnessy’s concern to investigate. In other words, the various criteria for being awake are not independent of one another: being awake, and indeed each basic state of consciousness, has a holistic character – the properties of various states of consciousness ‘necessarily occur in sets, each of which realizes a unique state of consciousness’ (p. 75). States of consciousness are not to be understood additively. The following is the holistic package which realizes the primary state of consciousness which is waking consciousness: experience, the availability of perceptual attention, and (at least in self-conscious beings) rationality.

Experience O'Shaughnessy takes to be indefinable, though easy to identify. The following are all types of experience: perception, sensation, thinking, imagining. By contrast, beliefs, intentions and memories are not experiences. (Some mental kinds, such as desire, may be either experiences or not.) Experiences are not mental states: they are essentially processive, or in flux. Indeed, it is only because of experience that we have a direct encounter with time. Although consciousness essentially involves experience of some sort – it is the only state of consciousness which entails that experiences are occurring – it is not itself an experience, or a stream of experience. For whereas any experience has a particular object, consciousness does not. Rather it is directed to the world as such: it is a certain attunement to reality. Consciousness is that state of consciousness which allows particular experiences to be directed to real objects. Because of this, it is not introspectable; only experiences are that. It is not ‘like anything’ to be conscious, though it is ‘like something’ to be experiencing, and one must be experiencing in some manner or other if one is conscious.

Although certain other states of consciousness, such as unconsciousness, are incompatible with experiences occurring, yet others in turn are not: we can dream...
while we sleep, for instance. We need therefore to turn to aspects of consciousness other than sheer experiencing to discover its distinctive nature: it is a matter of being ‘in touch with’ reality. One aspect of this is the possibility of **perceptual attention**. O’Shaughnessy does not require this to be available to any conscious subject: the concept of a sort of angelic consciousness which could only think about reality is not incoherent. Nevertheless even an angelic consciousness harbours the possibility in principle of perceiving. This is because perception is definable in completely general *a priori* terms: it is simply ‘experience taking an extensional object’. (So even awareness of sensation counts as ‘perception’.) Angelic consciousness would lack perception because of a lack of suitable extra-psychic stage-setting: it would be a deprived consciousness! At the very least, perceptual attention is ‘conceptually foreseeable’ for any subject who is conscious (p. 22). By contrast, perception is ruled out for those who are unconscious and asleep – dreams do not involve sensory states, and hence are not perceptual in character and have only intentional, not extensional, objects.

These matters are developed in greater detail in parts II and III. In the rest of part I O’Shaughnessy investigates the third aspect of consciousness, where, as he says, there is ‘mutual entailment right across the board’ (p. 267): rationality, thought, self-determination or freedom, appreciation of truth, language, and translucence come all together or not at all. Now obviously this package cannot be essential to consciousness as such, since it fails to apply to many animals who are conscious of the world; and in this stretch of the book O’Shaughnessy makes clear that he is focusing on consciousness in self-conscious beings. He does occasionally address the question of what takes the place of this package in the consciousness of non-rational animals – he refers, for example, to ‘the tendency to interpret sense-data in terms of innate and experience-acquired knowledge of the appearance of phenomenal objects’ (p. 269); but I would have welcomed a more sustained discussion of this matter. (Similar remarks apply to the later account of perception.) Nevertheless the section is a mine of illuminating discussions. O’Shaughnessy highlights the interlocking roles of the features just mentioned, in part by considering ways in which consciousness can be attenuated. He deals fascinatingly, for example, with intoxication (‘drunken epistemology’, no less!) and with madness. I cannot do justice to the range of these discussions, but the main points are the following: a limited form of ‘Cartesian’ access is defended; the way in which, when awake, we know the sources of and reasons for our beliefs is stressed; the activity of the ‘mental will’ in ‘synthesizing’ a coherent experience of the world is explored; and above all and most controversially, the indispensability of thought as the mental helmsman in all conscious experience is defended: ‘The role of thinking is central to the whole structure. In the final analysis it is because thinking is active and thinking is essential to consciousness that mental action is a necessary condition of consciousness’ (p. 264).

**Attention**

Part II of the book is entitled ‘The Attention and Perception’. Although many would agree that attention is an important mental phenomenon, it attains a pivotal role in O’Shaughnessy’s theory, since he identifies perception with ‘noticing’. This claim is far from being uncontroversial, of course; so too is the weaker claim that perception
at least involves the noticing of some object. Fred Dretske, for one, has argued at
length that perception is a much more basic achievement than any such ‘epistemic’
affair as noticing. However, without explicitly discussing his work, O’Shaughnessy
implicitly answers Dretske’s claim (while agreeing with the latter’s point that per-
ceptual experience has a richness that exceeds what we discriminate) by plausibly
claiming that any perceived objects that are unnoticed form part of a scene some
elements of which are noticed. Perception in the absence of any noticing at all is
unintelligible. The attention as such is of course more widely involved than in
perceptual episodes, and O’Shaughnessy spells out the general notion in terms of
‘psychic space’, which is a space of awareness. Only experiences occupy the attention,
and every experience occupies the attention. (An unattended-to sensation is not an
‘experience’, for O’Shaughnessy.) However, the attention is not something separate
from experiences. Indeed, the attention is experiential consciousness itself, under-
stood as a system of experiences. It is to this system that perceptual objects come as
objects. Perception is unique, in relation to the attention, in that here the occupant
of awareness is merely an awareness of an existential object. The form of awareness
which is in play here is, as O’Shaughnessy says, ‘extensional’. So to be aware of x
entails that x actually exists; and if x = y, in being aware of x one is aware of y. Hence
O’Shaughnessy can claim that the same fundamental notion of awareness is in play
when we speak of being perceptually aware of objects and of being aware of expe-
riences. In both we have a direct confrontation with some reality. Perception differs
in this respect from all forms of thinking, as well as from mental imagining. O’Shaugh-
nessy therefore argues that ‘perceiving that p’ is an epistemic affair that presupposes
‘perceiving x’: the former is caused by the latter. If, as many hold, the basic percep-
tual notion were ‘perceiving that ...’, truth and falsity should play a quite essential
role in perception; but they do not. An appreciation of truth is a relatively sophist-
cicated attainment that goes beyond basic perceptual capacities, since it presupposes
an equi-primordial appreciation of falsity and of what O’Shaughnessy calls a ‘truth-
gap’. To think a thought is not only to entertain something which can be false
to reality, it is knowingly to entertain it, i.e., to entertain it as something which
may possibly be false. O’Shaughnessy can, indeed, speak of the acquaintance with
truth/falsity as ‘a “Fall” comparable to the discovery of good/evil’ (p. 326). In
support, he argues at length against those such as Sartre who have claimed that
there can be a perception of negations and absences. All such negativities enter the
mind, rather, only with judgements, which take their rise from and presuppose
the simple positive encounter with reality that is basic perception itself.

So as to underline even more clearly the unique character of perception,
O’Shaughnessy devotes two chapters to the imagination, which of all mental
phenomena is most closely allied to perception. Imagination is a broad category; so
as to narrow the field down to what is of most interest to him (because most closely
allied to perception), he distinguishes between ‘direct object imaginings’ and ‘pro-
positional imaginings’. An example of the latter is make-believe, which is a form of
thinking of what is unreal as unreal and as of our own making. Another example is
judgement entertained while dreaming, as when I dream that a tiger is attacking me.
Not surprisingly, given that O’Shaughnessy has given pride of place to ‘perceiving x’
rather than ‘perceiving that p’ as the basic form of perception, it is direct object imaginings that are of more interest to him. These come in two forms, what he calls ‘imaginative perception’, and ‘perceptual imagining’. The former is in fact a case of perception itself, rather than simple imagining, though the imagination helps to construct the ‘internal object’ of the perception. An example of it is viewing a photograph as a photograph. When we see a photograph, what we ‘really’ see, and take ourselves really to see, is a flat card variously coloured; and yet in seeing this object we can also in some sense ‘see’, say, a landscape. Here a certain imaginative ‘interpretation’ is brought to bear upon the simple perceptual object, with the result that we have ‘one complex phenomenon with two internal objects’ (p. 347).

Since such cases actually involve genuine perception, it is to perceptual imagining that O’Shaughnessy finally turns as ‘the most fruitful area for study’. There are three main varieties of this: mental imagery, hallucination and dreaming (O’Shaughnessy focuses on the visual form of each). The chief point made is that none of these is or involves a visual experience. One reason why this must be conceded is that they are not attentive phenomena (p. 355). When we enjoy a genuine visual experience, it is always at least possible for there to be more content to the experience than we can take in. Although perception essentially involves noticing, various aspects of the content can be overlooked. In none of the present cases, however, is it possible for us to overlook or miss out things. If, for example, I imagine a rural scene, it makes no sense to suppose that I imagine a scene containing a hayrick but have overlooked this aspect of the content. The same is true for hallucinations properly so-called. For though O’Shaughnessy is quite happy to allow the possibility of genuine visual experiences in the absence of a suitable real-world object, he refuses to term them ‘hallucinations’, since actual hallucinations are as a matter of fact imaginative episodes in which our sense of reality has been diminished.

Whenever I imagine something, I thereby in some sense imagine a perceptual experience. When, for example, I imagine that rural scene, although O’Shaughnessy will call the meadows, farmhouse, etc., the ‘intentional object’ of the imagining, a visual perceiving of such things is the ‘immediate object’, or what he also calls the ‘filler’. Hence, importantly, there is no such thing as sheer imagination: there is, rather, visual imagination, auditory imagination, and so on. Imagination necessarily feeds off some sense modality or other: any imagining is but the ‘shadow’ of some mode of perceiving. By contrast, although there are of course visual as well as auditory and other sorts of perceptions, perception as such is ‘modeless’, since, as mentioned above, perception is the sheer awareness of an existent object, and the entire character of the perceptual experience derives from the nature of the object perceived. There is nothing about an experience that makes it, say, auditory, other than the simple fact that its object is a sound. (In a final chapter O’Shaughnessy has a fascinating discussion of the relationship between listening and hearing, which brings out the complexities of the relationship in an unparalleled way.)

Seeing

In part III O’Shaughnessy lays out his theory of perception, focusing on the sense of sight. After a chapter in which he discounts ‘blindsight’ as constituting a form
of perception, he unfolds his deeply unfashionable representationalist theory of perception. (The basics of this theory were already laid out in The Will, but here it receives considerable expansion.)

The theory in question is multiply representationalist, since whenever a material object is perceived, it is so in virtue of our perceiving several ‘mediators’. Something \( m \) is a mediator in relation to object \( x \) if it is non-identical to \( x \) and \( x \) is perceived in virtue of \( m \)'s being perceived. Mediators fall into two categories. Those in one category, though non-identical with a given \( x \), are also non-distinct from it. For example, we see a physical object at any given moment only in virtue of seeing a limited portion of its surface. Most would agree with this, if only because there is little temptation to suppose that we see surfaces instead of material objects, and because surfaces do present a visual appearance. O'Shaughnessy's theory becomes much more contentious when he argues that any material object is also seen only in virtue of our seeing mediators that are entirely distinct from those objects. There are two sorts of such distinct mediators in the theory. The first is light. Wherever we see a material object otherwise than as a silhouette, we see (in the full sense that we are visually aware of) the light which that object is reflecting on to our retinas: ‘We always see light. Indeed, in a certain sense only light... Light epistemologically precedes the objects it brings to view’ (pp. 441–3). (Since this chapter has already been published as a paper, I shall not discuss it further.)

O'Shaughnessy also recognizes an even more proximal type of visual mediator, sense-data. We ultimately see whatever we see in virtue of seeing sense-data. In part he justifies this claim by the familiar appeal to causal considerations. It is possible for visual experiences to be enjoyed in the absence of a suitable real-world object, and indeed in the absence of any light impinging on our retinas. (O'Shaughnessy is especially fond of citing after-images in this connection.) Should this occur, we would be aware of something even more ‘inner’ than our retinas, namely, sense-data. All we get in standard cases of perceiving objects in the world is something more: light, causal relations to some material object, and so on. Such additional factors cannot obliterate the form of awareness which was present in the former situation. Therefore sense-data are present as immediate objects of awareness in all perceptual situations. There are, however, distinctive features to O'Shaughnessy's account. For one thing, he stresses more than some do the way in which sense-data are quite independent of whether we are aware of them or not, having purely physical causes in the optical system. Sense-data are brute presences in consciousness, which we can overlook or attend to, just as we can the physical objects whose presences they are. Hence he can argue against Christopher Peacocke's introduction of ‘sensational properties' as an alternative to sense-data.

Throughout this discussion it is important to pay close attention to how O'Shaughnessy uses the terms ‘sense-datum’, ‘content’, ‘internal object’ and ‘experience’. The existence of a sense-datum does not by itself constitute the having of a visual experience. For that to occur, the sense-datum must be attended to and taken in some way. What we take the object to be is the internal object, or the content, of the experience. This, unlike the sheer awareness of sense-data, is an intentional affair. Now O'Shaughnessy construes Peacocke’s sensational properties as elements...
in the intentional content of perceptual experiences. Although O'Shaughnessy is happy to recognize such properties, they must be seen as something distinct from the simple extensional awareness of sense-data. For one thing, intentional content is not determined by purely physical causes alone, as sense-data are, but also by the recognitional and conceptual capacities of the subject. For another, intentional content can have no ‘gaps’ in it: we cannot overlook part of what we take an object to be, as we can overlook a sheer sensuous presence in our visual field. Indeed, it makes no sense to speak of noticing the internal objects of experience: noticing must already be there for such objects so much as to arise. O'Shaughnessy, indeed, uses this point as an argument against all the currently popular attempts to give a purely ‘cognitive’ or ‘intentional’ account of perception.

There is, however, an even more fundamental level in his theory than sense-data, namely, ‘the given’. This notion is to be understood as involving the absence of all interpretation or organization, and as the psychological stimulus for perceptual experience. As to its character, it is a two-dimensional atomistic array of colour-brightness values. Visual sense-data too are, according to O'Shaughnessy, merely two-dimensionally arrayed, and pre-interpretational; the difference is that the given does not form a visual field, but is atomistically conceived. Not only is there no interpretation at this level, there is not even organization. There are, for example, no lines in the given, the segregation of the given into objects being the work of the mind. The given is not, however, the ultimate ‘mediator’, since it is not seen; for all perception involves organization. The given is ‘a sort of “subperceptible”, underlying and causing a perceptual experience’ (p. 540). Sense-data arise as the first ‘material object’ of a noticing, involving synthesis and organization, which is itself caused by the given. Which precise syntheses take place, for any particular given, is determined by the nature of the mind itself. Not many readers, I should think, will find any of this particularly plausible.

Another important and distinctive aspect of O'Shaughnessy’s theory is his account of what he terms the transitivity of attention. Because sense-data stand in reliable projective relations to the arrays of light at our retinas (i.e., we normally see a red square sense-datum to the right of a round yellow one because a red square beam of light impinges on the retina to the left of a round yellow one), and because such light stands in similar projective relations to (parts of the surfaces of) material objects, in seeing sense-data in ordinary situations we ipso facto see the causally responsible light and material object. The requirement of projective relations for a mediated object to be seen allows O'Shaughnessy to discount the unpalatable consequence that we see our optic nerves whenever we see worldly objects (though it is less clear that it rules out the presumably equally unpalatable consequence that we see relevant areas on our retinas). In fact I found the whole discussion of the transitivity of attention both too brief and over-simple (just think of the blind spot, for example). Moreover, some account of non-deviance in causal chains is clearly presupposed in the account, though no details are given. It is important for O'Shaughnessy that the outward extending of attention is ‘extensional’: no reference to how the subject responds to the objects, or ‘takes’ them to be, enters at this level of analysis. O'Shaughnessy then faces the task of co-ordinating this extensional
account with an account of the ‘internal objects’ of visual experiences. After all, we do not unreflectively take ourselves to be constantly seeing light, or sense-data.

Here too I would have welcomed greater detail in the argument; for here, as in part I, O'Shaughnessy focuses almost exclusively on distinctively human perception, and brings in reference to ‘conceptual interpretations’. Since non-concept-applying animals also clearly do not standardly respond to sense-data and light as such, and presumably for the same reasons as apply to us, some account not couched in terms of concepts is badly needed. This becomes particularly pressing in the final chapter of part III, a discussion of ‘seeing in the round’. At any one time we see but one aspect of a material object, and yet take ourselves to be presented with coherent, three-dimensional bodies that present different appearances from different angles. O'Shaughnessy demonstrates the essential role of synthesis well here, but it is less clear that he allows the synthesis to be wholly pre-conceptual in character. More generally, throughout the development of his account of perception, many readers will feel surprise that O'Shaughnessy never addresses the epistemological problems which generations of philosophers have believed to attach to representationalism. There simply appears to be no problem here, as far as O'Shaughnessy is concerned.

Part III also includes an interesting discussion of the primary/secondary quality distinction, a version of which O'Shaughnessy endorses. Among the distinctive features of his own account are the claims that a term such as ‘red’ can literally apply to both material objects and visual sensations, and that such a term applies primarily to sensations. This is one reason why he rejects the standard dispositionalist account of secondary qualities. One clearly cannot analyse ‘red’ in terms of causing a certain sort of sensation if sensations themselves can be red. According to him, a better explication of the term is the following: something is red when it has the look that comes to acquaintance when a sensation of red is noticed. (This allows physical objects to be red because of the transitivity of attention: noticing a sensation usually is noticing a physical object, and the look of the one is the same as the look of the other at a given instant.) To the objection that a non-red material object can look red in unusual circumstances, O'Shaughnessy simply retorts that secondary-quality terms are multiply relative, both to perceivers and to situations. If the sky looks red to just one subject on one occasion, then the sky is red (for that subject and those circumstances). His account is, as he puts it, ‘democratic’ (p. 521). It is simply ‘most useful’ to assume certain relativizations in public human communication.

Because this book is so rich and controversial, substantive criticism is not possible here. So I shall end with an observation. I do not know if O'Shaughnessy has read Husserl: there is no mention of him in the work (but then very few people indeed are referred to). There are, however, very many aspects to O'Shaughnessy's account that strikingly parallel Husserl's thoughts on these topics. It is not inappropriate, I feel, to end this review with a mention of that profoundest philosophical analyst of consciousness and perception, for the present work too makes a major and indispensable contribution to the field.

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