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On Rejecting that Attention is Necessary for Consciousness

In "Inductive Skepticism and the Methodological Argument," Carolyn Suchy-Dicey argues that the claim that attention is necessary for consciousness (hereafter, ANC) is not undermined by what she identifies as a logical inductive skepticism. With this much, I agree. She further argues, however, that both Ned Block and, more directly, Christopher Mole reject ANC on a skeptical basis, and with this I disagree. My comments on her rich and provocative paper will focus on this disagreement. In sum, while I am willing to agree that one could reject ANC on the skeptical grounds identified by Suchy-Dicey, and that such a rejection would be illegitimate, I disagree that this is a proper characterization of Block's or Mole's rejection.

Suchy-Dicey identifies two kinds of inductive skepticism: logical inductive skepticism and pragmatic inductive skepticism. Logical inductive skepticism is the methodological position that induction from observed cases are never legitimately generalized to unobserved cases on the general grounds that no finite number of observed instances support generalizations to a potentially infinite number of unobserved instances. Pragmatic inductive skepticism, by contrast, is a localized skepticism about some particular generalization from the observed to the unobserved. For skepticism about a proffered induction to be pragmatic as against merely logical, the skeptic must identify some difference between the observed and the unobserved which plausibly undermines the generalization. While Suchy-Dicey charitably grants that logical inductive skepticism may be legitimate in some metaphysical contexts, she argues that it

is always illegitimate within the special sciences. To legitimately object to a generalization from observed to unobserved cases within the special sciences, one must offer at least one relevant difference between the observed and unobserved tokens. The only legitimate form of inductive skepticism within a special science, then, is a pragmatic inductive skepticism.

Suchy-Dicey then claims that all rejections of ANC can be construed as one or the other kinds of inductive skepticism.[1] Presumably, she holds this because she takes it as established that attention is necessary for all observed, indeed all observable, conscious states.[2] The argument here is that since our current methods of testing require that subjects be able to observe their conscious states, any claims about consciousness could only be generalized, at best, to observable conscious states. If this argument were successful, then there would be no way to test the claim that attention is necessary for consciousness against the weaker claim that attention is necessary for all observed conscious states. Inductive skepticism then becomes germane, since rejection of ANC is reduced to a refusal to generalize from the observed to the unobserved. Given that we are working within a special science, for the skepticism to be legitimate, the skeptic must identify a relevant difference between observed and unobserved conscious states.

Heeding the distinction between pragmatic and logical inductive skepticism is, I agree, crucial to denying ANC, *if one holds that attention is necessary for all observed conscious states*. Should the latter claim be granted, the relevant difference between observed and unobserved conscious states must be identified. If it cannot, then the

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[1] Suchy-Dicey, p.3-4.

[2] As 'state' seems to me to be maximally neutral with respect to which mental phenomena are candidates for consciousness and how they become conscious, though the author's discussion includes references to conscious perceptions and experiences, my reply will be couched solely in terms of states.

rejection of ANC is on illegitimate logical inductive skeptical grounds. The construal of Block and Mole's rejection of ANC as a version of logical inductive skepticism relies, then, on: (1) their commitment to the claim that attention is necessary for all observed conscious states; and (2) their inability to identify a relevant difference between observed and unobserved cases. I am happy to grant that logical inductive skepticism is an illegitimate rejection of ANC, but in what follows, I provide reasons to think that 1 is false.

Block's mesh argument subtly distinguishes reports from observation in a way that avoids commitment to the claim that attention is necessary for all observed conscious states. On Block's view, while the mechanisms of attention are necessary for reporting one's conscious states, we can then use those reports to identify the limits of reports.[3] Block argues that if reports in, for instance, the Sperling[4] and Landman[5] cases are taken at face value, there are conscious states whose contents are not reportable. This first-person report is then experimentally supported from the third-person, on Block's view, by identification of the neural mechanisms underlying phenomenal consciousness and their independence from the mechanisms underlying access consciousness.[6] The introspective reports and neural identifications allow a mesh between the two that supports the claim that some phenomenally conscious states are not access conscious. Since attention and reportability are held by Block to be necessary only for access consciousness, this amounts to a rejection of ANC. Block rejects ANC, then, because contrary to the methodological argument, we can use both first and third-person observations as

[3] Block, 2007, p. 484, 487
[4] Sperling, 1960.
[5] Landman et al, 2003.
[6] Block, 2007, p. 495-496.

evidence for states which are phenomenally, but not access, conscious. He is not committed to the claim that attention is necessary for all observed conscious states. Indeed, he seems committed to its denial.

Similar considerations are operative when we turn our attention to Christopher Mole's view. While he is committed to the claim that the mechanisms of attention are necessary for *some* reports, I see no reason to think that he is committed to the stronger claim that attention is necessary for *all* reports, much less for all observed conscious states. On Mole's view, answering experimenter's questions about ones conscious states requires having a structured thought about one's states, and having structured thoughts requires the deployment of appropriate concepts. Whether attention is necessary for a report turns on whether attention is necessary for the concepts deployed in the thought expressed by the report. In change-blindness, Mole claims, a demonstrative concept is likely to be required, and it's plausible to think that demonstrative concept deployment requires attention: To structure the thought that that thing is changing, I need to be able to deploy my THAT concept, and in order to deploy my THAT concept, I must attend to that thing.[7]

The necessity of attention for the deployment of demonstrative concepts does not by itself commit Mole to the claim that attention is necessary for all reports. Discussing this point, Suchy-Dicey quotes Mole as saying that "... attention is not necessary for consciousness, but it is necessary if one's experience is to provide one with knowledge of the sort probed by the experimenter's questions...." The rest of the quote, however, reads "... in a change-blindness experiment."[8] Whether Mole is committed to the claim that

[7] Mole, 2008, p. 96.
[8] Mole, 2008, p.96

attention is necessary for *all* reports turns, then, on whether he holds either that attention is necessary for all concept deployment or whether demonstrative concept deployment is necessary in all reports of conscious states.[9] While Mole may hold either disjunct, the text provides no definitive support for neither commitment. The only argument offered by Suchy-Dicey appears to be the truncated quote, which is insufficient to establish his commitment to the necessity of attention for all reports about conscious states or their contents, much less all observations.

Even if Mole is committed to the claim that attention is necessary for all observed conscious states, I do not agree that his arguments against ANC would then be best construed as a kind of logical inductive skepticism. Suchy-Dicey gives three construals of Mole to the contrary.

Her first construal of Mole's rejection of ANC as a logical inductive skepticism is the accusation that he directly appeals to skepticism. She says that: "In an encyclopedia entry by Mole, he writes that claims of universal necessity require an unrealizable number of instances correlating the lack of attention with the loss of perception."[10] If Mole required an unrealizable number of instances, then he would indeed seem to be a logical inductive skeptic of the illegitimate variety, whether or not he thinks that all states require attention to become conscious. In what I take to be the relevant passage from the SEP entry, however, what Mole actually says, is that "[n]o single one of these experiments can establish the claim that attention is always necessary for

[9] Mole may be taken as claiming something like the latter in Mole, 2008, p.97, but I find construing him that way somewhat uncharitable. As I go on to argue, that we cannot experimentally distinguish the claim that all conscious states are attended from the weaker claim that attention is necessary for all reports of conscious states, is weaker than the claim that attention is necessary for all conscious-state reporting.

[10] Suchy-Dicey, 12.

consciousness—that claim is a universally quantified one, and is not entailed by any one of its instances."[11] His stated objection is not that no number of instances of observed conscious states will justify generalization to the unobserved. Rather, his objection is that no single experiment is enough to support the generalization, since some conscious states may require attention while others may not. What is needed to support the generalizations is not an unrealizable number of observations, but observations of each type of conscious state which, Mole thinks, are legion. These are very different claims.

For her second and third construals of Mole as a logical inductive skeptic, Suchy-Dicey focuses on two possibilities he thinks need to be ruled out before ANC is embraced. The first is the possibility that attention is necessary for accessibility only and the second its necessity merely for facilitating reference in thought and speech. If Mole cannot identify a relevant difference between, respectively, accessible/inaccessible conscious states and referential/a-referential conscious states, then Mole is properly characterized as a logical inductive skeptic.[12] Suchy-Dicey argues that Mole can identify no such difference for two stated reasons. First, she claims we do not have any reason to believe there are conscious states that we are unable to reference in thought and speech. Second, if the distinctions between accessible/inaccessible and referential/a-referential conscious states are pragmatically relevant, then it must be attention that marks the distinction. Attention doesn't, so it isn't. Contra the first, Mole offers a reason, and contra the second, he thinks it pragmatically relevant. His reason is common sense, and Suchy-Dicey offers no argument against either it or its relevance.

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[11] Mole, 2009.

[12] Again, only if it could first be established that Mole accepts the claim that attention is necessary in all observed instances.

Mole's argument for the claim that there are unattended conscious states is that: (1) common sense decrees both that consciousness is necessary for attention and that only some conscious states require attention; (2) commonsensical positions should be accepted as accurate until experimentally undermined; and (3) experimental evidence to date does not, in this case, undermine common sense. As the commonsensical view would have it:

> ... attention is necessary for consciousness of very small or very unexpected changes, and … it's necessary for fully-functioning, cognitively-useful consciousness of the sort that can provide one with knowledge, that can enable one to respond appropriately to out of the ordinary driving conditions, and that can put one in a position to learn from a teacher's explanations. (95)

As the differences between those types of conscious states that require attention and those that don't are identified, the distinction at least appears pragmatically relevant. It is no objection to this view to say that experimental evidence for unattended conscious states is impossible. Even if it *is* impossible, we should indefinitely accept the distinction on commonsensical grounds. Mole's reason for rejecting ANC is his commitment to the commonsensical distinction that he argues is not undermined by the evidence.

Of course, Mole may be mistaken about either the deliverances of common sense, or that we should accept commonsensical deliverances until experimental evidence forces us to do otherwise. He may even be wrong that the evidence currently available does not, in fact, undermine the distinction. Where I disagree with Suchy-Dicey, however, is in construing Mole as providing no pragmatically relevant reason to think that we should not generalize from some conscious states to all. Perhaps Suchy-Dicey simply thinks that the deliverances of common sense are not

pragmatically relevant. If she does, however, then she needs to argue for that claim. If the deliverances of common sense are pragmatically relevant, then while Mole may be wrong, he is no logical inductive skeptic. Suchy-Dicey's assertion that there is no pragmatically relevant reason to accept the distinction needs argument.

In conclusion, I suggest that Suchy-Dicey's defense of ANC against Block and Mole should be fought on other grounds. Against Block, she would do better to argue that reports and neural mapping do not yield the evidence for unattended conscious states he thinks it does. Against Mole, she might argue either: (1) that common sense does not deny ANC; (2) that the deliverances of common sense should not be accepted until empirically undermined; or (3) that some experimental findings can show (seemingly contra her own claim) that all conscious states require attention. Pending such arguments, issues concerning inductive skepticism are orthogonal.

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