COMMENTARY ON BOGDAN'S "SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS: EXECUTIVE DESIGN, SOCIOCULTURAL GROUNDS"

Henry Shevlin

Bogdan's paper is extremely rich, and presents a number of intriguing ideas. I would first like to uncritically limn what I take to be the basic outline of Bogdan's account of consciousness, before raising some particular problems that arise from it.

One of Bogdan's central claims, and certainly one of the most striking, is that "consciousness is necessarily self-consciousness", where self-consciousness is taken specifically to be consciousness of one's relation to a given target. His argument for this is that in order to consciously represent something in the world, a subject must represent it at standing in some relation to herself, thereby distinguishing representations of internal states (such as pains) from external ones, and allowing her to guide her actions to achieve her goals.

This claim has the consequence that most animals and very young children are not conscious, since this requires self-consciousness, which in turn requires a rich suite of executive abilities (such as the ability to form intentions, engage in subsequent goal-driven behavior, and adjust actions in accordance with their success). A subject's possession of these abilities is what transforms "unconscious phenomenality" or "sentience" into conscious (and self-conscious) experience. However, Bogdan also tells us that a subject does not need to be actively engaging these high level abilities at a given moment for their experiences to be conscious; rather, they must have a "dispositional readiness" to allocate high-level cognitive resources to guide behavior.

Bogdan makes a number of further interesting claims about the development of consciousness in infants, the environmental conditions which brought self-consciousness into being in the first place, the broader nature of recent debates about consciousness. However, I would like to focus on three issues with the framework just outlined.

(1) Sentience

Sentience is a novel term introduced by Bogdan, and describes the putatively unconscious experience undergone by animals and young children. It is "unconscious phenomenality" (Bogdan uses the two terms interchangeably), which is transformed into conscious experience if and when a subject acquires the appropriate suite of high level executive abilities. Bogdan further tells us that it is "unconscious… awareness or experience of the physical environment" and is exemplified by blindsight, epileptic automatism, and ordinary cases of absent-mindedness.

It is not immediately clear how to interpret Bogdan's claims that sentience is on the one hand a form of experience, yet is also "unconscious and subpersonal."[1] I can see two ways of squaring these claims. First, one might think that sentient states are unconscious in the sense that subjects lack cognitive access to their contents, so cannot think of themselves as being in them, yet nonetheless experiential in the sense that there *is* something it is like for subjects to be such states. If this is what Bogdan has in mind, then sentience sounds similar to Block's notion of cognitively inaccessible

[1] In the quoted section, Bogdan is providing a characterization of phenomenality in subjects or conditions where high-level executive control is absent, but he goes on (p.21) to specifically identify this with sentience.

phenomenal consciousness (indeed, Block makes use of some of the same examples in his 1995 paper). Bogdan seems to consider such an account of sentience later in the paper, when he considers that "[i]f what it-is-like is just phenomenal sentience, then its explanation is no different from that of blindsight and belongs to neuropsychology." However, it is hard to square this with Bogdan's claim that sentient states are subpersonal. If such states do not really occur at the personal level, but are merely neural precursors to a subject's mental life, then it is hard to see how they could contribute to what it is like to be that subject at a time.

The possibility Bogdan seems to favor is that there is *nothing* it is like to be in sentient states at all. This would remove the difficulty posed by Bogdan's claim that such states are subpersonal. However, it then prompts the concern that it is wrong to characterize these states as experiential at all. Indeed, Bogdan characterizes sentient states not merely as experiential but as possessing phenomenality. One interpretation is that sentience is playing a similar role in Bogdan's theory to that played by the notion of qualitative character in some forms of higher-order thought theory.[2] That is, we should understand a subject's sentient states as unconscious and as playing no role in determining what it is like to be that subject, yet distinguished from merely neurological non-mental states in their possession of a distinctive sort of representational character. However, whilst higher-order theorists have gone to great lengths to explain just what sort of character this is, and how it distinguishes unconscious states with qualitative character from merely neurological non-mental states, Bogdan gives us no such account. This prompts the question of just what sort of states have "unconscious phenomenality". Do firings in my LGN or retina have unconscious phenomenality? If not, why not?

(ii) Unconscious states in normal humans

Bogdan draws a clear line between most animals and young infants on one side, and higher animals and humans on the other. Only the latter belong to what he calls the "consciousness club". Bogdan also acknowledges the occurrence of various unconscious episodes and states of unconsciousness among conscious creatures. Aside from pathological cases, he gives the example of "normal people who are confused and drowsy" or engaged in "absent minded behavior (when walking or driving)" as cases of "unconscious sentience." One complaint here one might raise here is that it is simply implausible that subjects in such states are not conscious. I know what it feels like to be drowsy, and I know what it feels like to be confused, because I have had conscious experience of such. Absent-minded driving cases are more difficult, insofar as it can frequently seem to one on such occasions that minutes or even hours have gone by all but unnoticed. However, here too I find it simply implausible to claim that there is nothing it is like for the subjects in such cases.

This is not the main issue I wish to raise, however. I am concerned instead as how Bogdan accounts for the fact that some states of a given subject are conscious and others unconscious. Bogdan's theory of consciousness seems to be a dispositional one, insofar as it requires for a subject's having conscious states merely a "durable dispositional readiness of high-level executive abilities", rather than their actual deployment on a given occasion. One advantage of this account is that it can allow that even very simple and unreflective experiences can be conscious provided that they occur in the mind of a subject with the right executive abilities. For example, if I am lying on a beach whilst feeling the warmth

[2] See, e.g., Rosenthal 2005.

of the sun on my skin and listening to music, we presumably want to allow that my experiences are conscious, even though I am not engaged in any sophisticated autobiographical narratives or the planning and rehearsing of actions. The point is that I *could* be.

However, this same advantage means that it is hard to see why some states should be conscious and others not. An absent-minded driver *could* deploy her executive abilities at a given time: if traffic conditions rapidly worsen, she might very rapidly switch into a more strategic mode of thought, considering what alternate routes she could take. Likewise, no matter how drowsy I am, I could engage in relatively high level cognitive tasks like planning or predicting very swiftly, especially given an appropriate stimulus (a cold shower will often do the trick). Hence we have no explanation as to why these states are unconscious.

A clue as to Bogdan's view on the matter is that he characterizes the relevant sort of dispositional readiness required for consciousness as "a low-key activation of high-level executive abilities." That characterization makes it sounds as though self-consciousness requires a certain kind of occurrent event, rather than merely dispositions. It would then be open to Bogdan to say that in the kind of cases of unconsciousness in normally conscious subjects which I mentioned, even this low-level activation is absent (though it can of course be rapidly activated, as noted).

This revised account would still not tackle cases in which a conscious subject was not conscious of some mental states but was conscious of others. For example, imagine that I am working intently on a philosophy paper in a coffee shop. I might be conscious of the page in front of me, whilst entirely oblivious to the conversations going on around me. I am not sure exactly what Bogdan would say about such a case, but it seems consistent with his approach to say that my auditory sensations in such a case would not be conscious. But what is the mechanism involved when I decide to render such sensations conscious (as I might do, if I hear the familiar voice of a friend)? One natural answer is attention, which is cited by Bogdan as an example of a high-level executive ability. But if the view is that it is actually being attended at a particular moment which renders a given representation conscious, then Bogdan's picture no longer seems a dispositional one. Further, since a very wide range of animals can selectively deploy cognitive attention (including birds; see e.g., Tansley 1965), Bogdan's consciousness club no longer seems quite so exclusive.

(3) Consciousness and self-consciousness

Bogdan holds that all consciousness is necessarily self-consciousness, or "consciousness of self-to-target relatedness." This is a section of the paper that is unfortunately brief, as the claim would benefit from further exposition, though I look forward to learning more about the view from Bogdan's book. Still, the main arguments Bogdan gives in its favor is that conscious behavior is goal-directed (here he gestures towards the literature on affordances), and being goal-directed requires self-regulation.

However, more exposition of these ideas would be helpful, since as matters stand, this case is somewhat lacking. First, Bogdan has not made a convincing case that *only* conscious behavior is goal-directed. A wide range of animals, many of which Bogdan takes not to be conscious, engage in at least ostensibly goal-directed behavior and self-regulation (as in a predator attempting to remain concealed from its prey, or, even more impressively, the construction and use of tools by corvids). Further, some of the examples of unconscious behavior in humans which he gives, such as absent-minded driving, seem

to involve adopting goals and self-regulating one's behavior to achieve them. Perhaps Bogdan has some concept of goal-directed behavior that is dramatically different from that found in lowers animals and humans acting unconsciously, for example, one that involves not merely desires or impulses, but judgments as to what will be in one's best interests. However, the risk is that any such criterion for conscious will then be too strong, and will exclude obvious cases of conscious behavior in humans.

Second, Bogdan has not made a case for the claim that goal-directedness and self-regulation require a concept of the self. It does not seem obviously impossible that a creature might have a desire for some thing or event *x* or think of it as good or desirable, and also believe that a behavior *B* is the most effective way to achieve *x*, hence leading it to implement *B*, and do all of this without explicitly tokening a concept of itself. And again, it seems possible that a subject might consciously regulate various behaviors, such as their walking pace, their stance, and the focus of their vision, without thereby having a distinctive concept of themselves as subjects. They might simply conceive of them as systems that they needed to keep in equilibrium, for example.

These are my main queries concerning the paper, though as noted, it is a very rich account of a wide range of phenomena, and I look forward to discussing additional aspects of Bogdan's theory over the course of the discussion.

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