L'Etat…C'est Toi? (Comments on Eric Schwitzgebel's 'If Materialism is True, then the United States is Probably Conscious')

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This is a bold and bracing paper that should make us think not only about what it takes for a creature to be (phenomenally) conscious, but also what it takes for an *argument* about the nature or extent of consciousness to be any good. Schwitzgebel begins by noting that we are certain that we humans are conscious, and also pretty sure that a variety of non-human animals (sufficiently) biologically and behaviorally like us are conscious as well. Moreover, he continues, we're also inclined to believe that behaviorally sophisticated biological creatures that are physiologically *unlike* humans and non-human animals could be conscious. But could the United States itself be a conscious being, a single center of consciousness? That prospect, Schwitzgebel supposes, would strike us as 'utterly bizarre'. However, as he notes (p. 1), this 'sense of strangeness is no rigorous index of reality', but instead (p. 2) is driven by the prejudice he calls *contiguism*, which denies phenomenal consciousness to entities with parts that are 'visibly spatially discontinuous'.

Now there are many differences between (normal) human beings—presumed paradigms of consciousness—and the United States, so it may not be clear that it is only our contiguism that prevents us from attributing consciousness to the US. Not only is the US, unlike humans, spatially discontinuous, but the US, unlike humans (as far as we know), is composed of (among other things) numerous creatures who are themselves conscious beings. Moreover, if we *can* manage to think of the US as a single, integrated whole that receives and processes stimuli (e.g.

international provocation) and responds to them appropriately (e.g. by declarations of war or diplomatic overtures, depending on the circumstances), the deliberation processes that lead to these responses take much longer to execute than those of human beings. And of course humans, unlike the US, are biologically integrated creatures.

However, as Schwitzgebel argues (in his discussion of another sort of spatially distributed creature, the Antaeans or antheads), we are (often) willing to attribute consciousness to creatures whose reactions to stimuli or processes of deliberation are considerably slower than our own, and even to creatures composed of other conscious beings. So it can't be *those* differences between ourselves and the US that count against its being conscious. Moreover, Schwitzgebel argues, it can't be simply a matter of our being integrated biological creatures, while the US is not; not only is it unclear why only such creatures could have conscious experiences, but the US can be considered to be an integrated biological creature itself. After all, he notes, the US contains genetic material that is transmitted through the generations (via its constituent biological organisms), it maintains homeostasis—and can even reproduce (albeit by fission). That is, it has the features and capacities distinctive of integrated biological organisms.

There are many questions that can be raised about Schwitzgebel's claim that the internal organization of the US and its relation to its environment is sufficiently analogous to the internal workings and relation to the environment of a human being for it to count as an integrated biological organism. Are the processes he discusses sufficiently similar to genuine biological processes such as homeostasis and reproduction? Are there other important biological functions that humans possess and spatially distributed entities lack? It's also not obvious that the US's 'complex informational integration, self-monitoring…and sophisticated environmental responsiveness' is quite as similar to that of a conscious being as Schwitzgebel (p. 13) suggests.

Let us suppose, however, that there is a perfect analogy; that the US as a whole can participate in and undergo processes that are analogous to all the important biological *and* psychological functions of a normal human being (including historical as well as current relations to its environment and its community). Many would argue that even this is not sufficient for such a creature to be conscious, since we can conceive or imagine a creature just like this, but which lacks the capacity for conscious experience. Some materialists, however (among them, Schwitzgebel notes, Ned Block, who (in his 1980) presents a somewhat similar thought experiment involving the people of China),[i] suggest that there remains a crucially important difference between the US and a normal human being: humans, but not the US, possess a single biological center of consciousness—a *brain*. And the possession of a biological brain (or perhaps something else that instantiates, as Searle (1980) puts it, the brain's 'causal powers'), is necessary for consciousness. As Schwitzgebel points out (sec. 5), 'all materialists agree: Brains are awesome!'.

But, he immediately asks, 'What is so special about brains?'—particularly if a creature without one can process information and coordinate responses as well as brains do, is equally embedded in its current and past environment, can monitor itself, and, in addition, has whatever it takes to count as an integrated biological creature. To be sure, Schwitzgebel (once again) acknowledges, it does seem bizarre to think of such a spatially distributed entity as a conscious being, but he suggests that if we try to see the US from the perspective of a 'planet-sized alien', we will recognize that it is only our prejudice against spatially distributed creatures, our contiguism, that prevents us from acknowledging that the US is, or at least could be, conscious.

Schwitzgebel's argument is, among other things, a sly inversion of Leibniz's (in)famous (1714) 'mill' argument against materialism. While Schwitzgebel has us adopt the perspective of

a planet-sized creature to consider the internal workings of the US (and its relation to its environment), Leibniz has us 'conceive…[of the brain] as increased in size, while keeping the same proportions, so that one might go into it as into a mill'. And Leibniz proceeds to argue that upon entering the mill-like structure '…we should, on examining its interior, find only parts which work one upon another, and never anything by which to explain a perception'; in short, he argues that this thought-experiment should convince us that brains are not the right sorts of things to have (conscious) perceptual experiences. However, as Schwitzgebel might put it, if we reject Leibniz's contention that brains cannot be conscious because, if increased in size, they would seem to be merely a bunch of moving, interacting parts, we should also reject the contention that the US cannot be conscious because from our perspective it seems to be merely a bunch of moving, interacting parts. We cannot, that is, make the distinction between conscious and unconscious beings on the basis of features that shift along with one's size-dependent point of view.

Schwitzgebel contends that to make a principled distinction between human beings and the United States on the basis of the fact that we, unlike the US, possess brains, we must give an account of (p. 13) '*what* feature of neurons, possibly possessed also by non-neural systems [but not the US as a whole, which nonetheless (arguably) shares our functional and representational capacities], gives rise to consciousness'—and this seems, to say the least, to be a daunting task. I agree: even if some sort of phenomenal-physical identity thesis is true, even if there is some unique feature of human neural activity (or some more general sort of activity shared by certain non-neural systems), there is no way to show this definitively if one has to respond to arguments such as Leibniz's. As the descendants of the mill argument (i.e. Nagel's (1974) and Jackson's (1982) Knowledge Arguments and Chalmers's (1996) Zombie Argument) make clear, there will

be *no* feature of the brain that can be identified by means of perception (or deduction from neurophysiological description) that seems even remotely connected to those features of conscious experience we discern in introspection.

There are many materialists, of course (in Chalmers's (2002) terms, 'Type-B' materialists), who argue that this does not entail that there *is* no such feature of neurons, but merely that we cannot deduce it from descriptions of their physical properties and relations: the conceivability of a mill without the floss does not mean that the existence of one is possible. However, a response of this sort also opens up a possibility that may be more congenial to Schwitzgebel, namely, that just as there is no way to deduce the occurrence of consciousness from the presence of a certain type of neural activity, so there is no definitive way to *rule out* the possibility that spatially distributed creatures with highly sophisticated information processing capacities and relations to their environments are conscious. Type-B materialists must face, in Ned Block's (2002) terms,[ii] the 'harder problem of consciousness'—the question of how to determine *which* physical properties our phenomenal concepts could denote—and this problem, though it doesn't question the claim that conscious experience is explicable by physicalistic theories, is nonetheless pretty hard.

At the end of his paper, Schwitzgebel wonders whether he has presented 'an argument [for]… group consciousness, a challenge to materialism, or a *reductio* of the enterprise of armchair metaphysics about consciousness'. In my view, Schwitzgebel's candidate for group consciousness is no more (and perhaps no less!) plausible than Block's Chinese nation, even though Schwitzgebel's 'group' is long-lived and has extensive interactions, past and present, with its environment. Has he presented a challenge to materialism? Perhaps; but if so, it's not unique, since, as Thomas Nagel points out in his (1965/2001, p. 110), *dualists* (who take their

metaphysics seriously) are in the same position. There, Nagel expresses a revulsion for physicalism, on the grounds that it cannot explain what seems distinctively *subjective* about our conscious experiences. However, he adds, physicalism's failure to do so

> is no more an argument against physicalism than against most other theories of mind, including dualism…A non-corporeal substance seems safe only because in retreating from a physical substance as a candidate for the self, we are so much occupied with finding a subject whose states are originally and not derivatively mine—one to which the physical body can be related in a way which explains how *it* can be mine—that we simply postulate such a subject without asking ourselves whether the same objections will not apply to it as well.

On the other hand, in my view Schwitzgebel *has* raised serious and important questions about the prospects for armchair metaphysics about consciousness (if not for armchair metaphysics in general). He has made clear how hard it is to use intuitions about whether there could be creatures that are not conscious, despite being physically, functionally, or representationally like us, to make progress in determining the nature of conscious experience, and has in this way supported the 'Type B' strategy of setting such intuitions aside. But if armchair metaphysics cannot help to determine whether it is the neural or functional or representational similarities between ourselves and other types of creatures that are responsible for consciousness, and if empirical investigation cannot do so by itself, and if general methodological considerations are inconclusive, then devising a useful methodology for the metaphysics of conscious experience is a difficult problem indeed.

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[i] One important difference is that Block, unlike Schwitzgebel, does not maintain that his 'Chinese nation' has biological integrity.

[ii] See also Levine (2007), Balog (ms), and my (2008) for further discussion.