
E. Jonathan Lowe

Subjects of Experience

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In Lowe's book one can witness a clash of ideas about the nature of conscious beings: the author is torn by the persuasiveness of the intuitive, commonsense comprehension of one's own basic essence, and by the attractiveness of the simple, naturalistic notion of sentient creatures. He hopes to reconcile these apparently different conceptions and present a picture of human subjects which is naturalistic, metaphysically coherent and consistent with subjective intuitions. Holding to a realist view of the mental and approaching the problem of consciousness in empiricist tradition he unembarrassingly professes the views regarded by many as old-fashioned.

Lowe advocates very convincingly the causal, representative theory of perception. His lucid explication of essential differences between perceiving and having perceptual experiences, and between phenomenal and doxastic senses of 'look' or 'appear' is particularly illuminating to a reader.

Proceeding from a realist attitude towards subjective experiences, Lowe highlights the importance of their sensuous aspects for mental activity by defending a plausible thesis that a true intentionality and genuine cognition must ultimately be grounded in phenomenal content of sensations. Thought, he concludes, is not linguistic but imaginative: at the most fundamental level we 'think in ideas', and this ideational thinking is non-discursive. It is impossible to endow a computer with genuine cognitive states without equipping it with suitable sense modalities.

Observing that experiences are individuated by their subjects, Lowe explains that our own thoughts and experiences, when present and conscious, are not presented to us as objects of our awareness, but as constituents of it. He further explicates that thoughts and experiences are 'adjectival' upon the self, and that only a certain sort of substantival theory of the self can do justice to this fact.

Lowe avows of rejecting any variety of physicalism, even in its mildest non-reductionist guises, as a basis for a scientifically and philosophically acceptable account of human beings,

as subjects of experience, thought and action.

Intuition tells Lowe, like, I suppose, many of us, that mental states have independent causal powers, that persons or selves who think, feel and act intentionally are not identical with their bodies or brains. Lowe argues that the capacity for perception and agency does not of its nature reside in any sort of cerebral condition. Recognising the power of mental events to make a difference to how the world goes over and above any difference made by physical events, he claims of discarding both token-token identity theories and supervenience theories of mental events and processes, and defending, instead, a variety of interactionist dualism.

This is a radical claim: if one wants to consistently hold to it, one has to admit that the laws of physics must be violated to a definite degree in processes involving mental causation, because otherwise there would be no mental causation *over and above* specific intricate patterns of physical causation. Lowe, however, balks at making such an "unscientific" assertion and concedes that every physical event has purely physical antecedent causes so that a principle of physical causal closure is satisfied. As a result, his notion of mental causation turns out to be a (non-reductionist) physicalistic notion. When he asserts that his view of the causal status of the mental is not compatible with a supervenience theory of mental states, he is logically inconsistent for if every event has purely physical causes, there can never be a mental difference without an underlying physical difference, and therefore mental events cannot have *independent* causal powers. Lowe's contention as if the principle 'the same brain event — the same mental episode' were not making sense since it is impossible to practically replicate brain states misses the point. By the similar argument one might question also the soundness of the notion of physical causation 'the same physical event — the same physical effect', and abandon as meaningless also the principle of physical causal closure. Lowe's claim that causal explanation in mentalistic terms can still be regarded as autonomous with respect to physical explanation, on the grounds that mentalistic explanations invoke generalisations which are not at all salient at the purely physical level, is a classical non-reductionist physicalistic claim.

Lowe tries to distance himself from physicalism also in another way that, too, is rather du-

bious. He says he rejects the reductionist view that a tree can simply be regarded as being nothing over and above an assemblage of subatomic particles, for these particles constitute a tree rather than an entity of some quite different non-biological kind because of their particular organisation. However, no reductionist is so stupid as to argue that a tree is merely an unstructured assemblage of particles. Every physicalist regards a tree as a specifically organised system of particles in a specific dynamical state. Regrettably, nowadays it is quite a widespread custom to first caricature physicalism as a foolish philosophy and then present correct physicalistic views as a non-physicalistic position. The attractiveness of the elegant and simple physicalistic world view is so strong that hardly anybody dares to oppose its basic principles.

One may seriously doubt whether Lowe has succeeded in elaborating a naturalistic but non-physicalistic theory of the self. In fact, Lowe himself is also not pretentious in this respect: he sees his work as an attempt to begin to answer, rather than to entirely solve, the posed problems. He admits that general human intelligence is a big mystery. Nevertheless, Lowe's book is remarkable. Although Lowe accepts the basic physicalistic doctrines, he, unlike the physicalists, does also justice to intuitively comprehensible subjective facts, and brings the conclusions drawn from these inescapable facts into direct confrontation with modern physicalistic (naturalistic) beliefs about the nature of subjects of experience, so that a reader has a rare opportunity to witness the historical clash of ideas in the form it has when it takes place within the bounds of a single mind. It is like seeing the battle from the very centre of the battlefield. Lowe's book leaves it up to everyone of us with which of conflicting ideas to take sides, and in making up one's mind it is important to follow Lowe's advice not to let uncritical metaphysical preconceptions obscure one's choice.

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