

Strange Experience: Why Experience Without Access Makes No Sense

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0 · Introduction: Strange Pain

Imagine that you're experiencing incredible pain right now: a sharp, piercing pain in your lower back. But there's something strange about this pain. It doesn't feature in your mental life in the way that 'normal' experiences do. It's causally isolated from your other 'conscious' mental processes: you're unable to determine the pain's location (even though you *feel* it in your lower back), you can't describe its qualities (although it *feels* sharp and piercing), and you're unable to notice that your back feels any different from how it normally feels (even though your back does *feel* very different from the way it normally feels). This pain could continue, and you could go about your day as you normally would without it 'making a difference' or distracting you. You could even hear this very description and think, "Wow, what a horrible scenario!", without realizing that this describes precisely your own situation.

This strikes me as a strange sort of pain. It's not the absence of pain *behavior* (or any outwardly observable effects) that makes this pain strange. Instead, what's strange is that the pain doesn't show up to *you*: it has no 'inwardly' observable effects. You're not merely doing a great job of masking your pain from others or from yourself; rather, *your* pain is, in a sense, masked from *you*.

1 · Conceptual Dualism

TWO WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT CONSCIOUSNESS

We can think of mental states in a how-it-feels sense, as *phenomenally (P-) conscious*: as 'experienty', as feeling a particular way, as having a certain ineffable qualitative character.

We can also think of mental states in a how-it-works (functional) sense, as *access (A-) conscious*: as available for arbitrary use within our cognitive economy, as uniquely well-positioned to directly influence one's thoughts and behaviors.

DISTINCT CONCEPTS

P-consciousness and A-consciousness are standardly taken to be conceptually distinct in the sense that they lack the relevant *a priori entailments*. And as evidence for/against such a priori entailments, we typically appeal to conceivability tests.

Negative P-to-A Entailment Thesis: That some mental state is P-conscious does not a priori entail that that mental state is also A-conscious.

Negative A-to-P Entailment Thesis: That some mental state is A-conscious does not a priori entail that that mental state is also P-conscious.

Conceptual Dualism: P-consciousness and A-consciousness share no a priori connections. You can't discover any functional features of some mental state just by reflecting on its phenomenal features, and vice versa. (cf. The view that "is black" and "is square" are conceptually distinct.)

2 · Strange Experiences, Strange Subjects, and More

Strange Experiences: mental states that are P-conscious for some subject but also functionally isolated and therefore not A-conscious for that subject.

PROGRESSIVELY STRANGER CASES

- *Strange Experience Collection*: A subject has more than one strange experience at once (e.g. strange pain + strange tickle + strange smell).
- *Strange Modality*: An entire sensory modality of a subject goes strange (e.g. All visual experience is made strange).
- *Strange Subjects*: Every P-conscious state of a subject goes strange (i.e. The opposite of a philosophical zombie: all P-conscious states and no A-conscious states).

SKEPTICISM ABOUT CONCEIVABILITY OF STRANGE SUBJECTS

1. **The Subjective Unity Worry**: Is there really any subject left remaining if the various experiences that ‘come together’ in a subject can’t bear any functional relations to one another and to the subject which owns them?
2. **The Mental Action Worry**: We typically think of (even purely phenomenal) minds as capable of mental action: they make decisions, form judgments, initiate action, and rehearse mental routines. Would any of this be possible for a subject that lacked any and all functional organization?
3. **The Temporal Relations Worry**: We typically think that the experiences of a subject at one time are causally related to the experiences of the same subject at time a later time. Could a strange subject be temporally structured in this way? If not, can we make sense of a single strange subject having a sequence of experiences?

NOTE: These ‘global’ Strange Subject worries should have ‘local’ analogues in other cases.

Structured Subject Intuition: Conceiving of a phenomenal mind already involves the conception of some kind of underlying functional structure in which various experiences are embedded and through which they bear relations to one another. We don’t conceive of the ebb and flow of experience as being structurally/functionally unconstrained—we necessarily apply a structural/functional lens when thinking about the collection of experiences which comprise a given subject.

ADDITIONAL STRANGE CASES

- *Strange Modality Expansion*: A subject has an ‘extra’ Strange Modality. Consider, for instance, having a Strange Modality which gives you inaccessible bat sonar experiences.
- *Strange Swapping*: Two different subjects are A-conscious of each *other’s* P-conscious states (or vice versa). For instance, consider a case in which ‘you’ are currently experiencing the life of someone else while also thinking about and making decisions about your own life.
- *Strange God*: A subject who ‘has’ every experience in the world (i.e. your experiences, every bat’s experiences, etc.) but is unable to access any of them. Similarly, consider a subject who has every experiences but can only access the experiences of a single organism (e.g. you experience everything, but are only A-conscious of ‘your’ P-conscious states.)

3 · Can Strange Experiences Be Made Palatable?

If Strange Experiences are not conceivable, then Conceptual Dualism will lose the justification necessary for their denial of P-to-A a priori entailment. Consequently, it's unclear if there really is a clean distinction between thinking of 'consciousness' in an how-it-feels vs. how-it-works way.

'RADICAL' A PRIORI SKEPTICISM

Objection: "Why be so sure that there's some fact of the matter about whether strange subjects are conceivable? It's a mistake to insist on a clear verdict in such problem cases."

Reply: This approach can't be used in support of Conceptual Dualism. It proves too much: it undermines the notions of conceivability/the a priori Conceptual Dualists rely on.

DIFFERENT NOTIONS OF ACCESS

Accessed/Accessible Objection: "We can distinguish between mental states that are *actually accessed* from those which are *merely accessible*. And if we understand 'a-conscious' to mean 'actually accessed', then it's easier to accept that there can be p-conscious states that don't become a-conscious."

Reply: The basic problem with this kind of approach is that it merely relocates, rather than removes, the challenge. Replacing an '*all p-conscious states must be accessed*' constraint with an '*all p-conscious states must be accessible*' constraint does nothing to remove the motivating worry.

DIMMED EXPERIENCE

Objection: "There are *actual* cases of p-consciousness without a-consciousness: cases of experiences at the periphery of our phenomenology. We typically think such 'dimmed' experiences are still *experiences*, but they may not be a-conscious in the usual way."

Reply: Dimmed experiences look like 'unaccessed but still accessible' mental states. And I think it would be much less clear that these were really experiences if they were totally inaccessible.

UNIMAGINABLE, NOT INCONCEIVABLE

Objection: "Are we sure that we run into any tension just in *conceiving* of inaccessible experiences? It might be an act of *imagination* that gets us into trouble: we try to simulate what a strange experience would feel like and then when we 'check on' this simulated experience, we, unsurprisingly, always find such experiences to be a-conscious. Such 'checking' is a paradigmatic a-conscious act/process."

Reply: Our 'experience' concept can be applied without actively imagining or conceiving of any determinate kind of experience. And I think we get the same conceivability verdict in cases where such 'sampling' isn't occurring (and so can't be interfering with our assessment). For instance, consider the strange case where some bat enjoys a functionally isolated sonar experience—say, a sonar experience 'generated' by the brain tissue in some other bat's head. I take it that this case runs into precisely the same problems as the earlier cases, and yet to conceive of this case, you didn't access some 'sample' sonar experience.

BARE DENIAL

Objection: “You’re right that the above objections can’t be used to decisively remove the challenge. But the conceivability of Strange Experiences is *basic*. When intuitions diverge over such basic conceptual ‘starting points’—presuming that we really have the same concept in mind and are not talking past one another—all that’s left is a familiar sort of bare disagreement. So you say that you can’t conceive of inaccessible experiences, but you’re *just wrong*—in the same way that those who insist non-black squares are inconceivable are *just wrong*.”

Reply: I agree that we should embrace the *basicness* of this issue. But even a stalemate would represent progress here, since Conceptual Dualism (in my estimation) hasn’t received enough scrutiny. And we can still make progress on basic disagreements by drawing out the downstream consequences of each position, and seeing how those consequences interact with our other commitments. If demonstrating the full range of such consequences is not ultimately decisive, that would then support an enlightened agnosticism—it would not permit stubborn partisanship.

4 · Following the Structured Subject Intuition

CLARIFYING MY VIEW

Austere Conceptual Functionalism (?): P-conscious mental states must (a priori) be A-conscious.

- *Not analytical functionalism*: While analytical functionalism holds that *all* mental thought/talk can be *reduced* to functional thought/talk, this view only claims that the determinable concept of ‘P-consciousness’/‘experience’ a priori entails certain functional constraints.
- *Doesn’t rule out conceivability of absent qualia or inverted spectrum cases*: Although I, myself, reject A-to-P entailment (i.e. I think zombies are conceivable), the view doesn’t require this.
- *Not a metaphysical commitment*: the view is committed neither to materialism (since one can, in principle, combine functionalism with dualism), nor to phenomenal realism (since it remains to be seen if there’s anything in reality to which our ‘experience’ concept applies). The view will, however, *constrain* the metaphysics of mind.

NEXT STEPS

Argument from Epistemology: Assuming that strange experiences are conceivable, on what grounds do we ever rule out skeptical hypotheses involving strange experiences (e.g. the hypothesis that I am now enjoying inaccessible bat-sonar experiences)? Given their central commitment, Conceptual Dualists must appeal to empirical inquiry to settle such issues. But it’s unclear how we could ever gather meaningful observational data on strange experiences, since they, by definition, don’t impact subjects in any observable way—even ‘from the inside’.

Argument from Metaphysics: Assume we *do* have a grip on the actual overlap between P-consciousness and A-consciousness. Still, Conceptual Dualism seems to make it impossible for us to use this data to inform a corresponding metaphysics because any posited metaphysical relationship would have to bridge an unbridgeable conceptual divide. In short, we run into a conceptual interaction problem that mirrors the old, familiar substance interaction problem.

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Comments/questions sent to jacksonkernion@gmail.com would be much appreciated!

Help me out by logging your intuitions about strange experience: jacksonkernion.com/survey