Consciousness, semiosis, and the unbinding problem

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Abstract

Any wider discussion of semiosis must address not only how semiosis came about, in terms of evolutionary pressures and requisite cognitive infrastructure, but also – as importantly, and too easily forgotten – how human beings experience and have experienced it, and how that experience reflects (at the same time shaping) its development. Much discussion has focused on resolving how inputs from external sensory modalities combine with internal brain processes to produce unified consciousness: the so-called binding problem. One might wish to distinguish between the coming together of conscious experience in terms of underlying mechanics and the seemingly unavoidable reality that human beings experience a consciousness that is, from the onset, phenomenally unified. The unbinding problem is shown to be potentially just as important to telling the story.

Keywords:
Binding problem
Experience
Semiosis
Semiotic resources
Multimodality
Language origins

1. Introduction

You are, let us suppose, studying a landscape painting hung on a museum wall; while so doing you are absentmindedly playing with a pen, exploring its shape with your fingers, and over to your right you can hear a murmured conversation. The painting, as it features in your consciousness, is a complex of many parts all of which are unified in a distinctive way: you see the depicted tree-covered mountains, the bubbling brook, the frame and surrounding wall. The same applies to your experiences of the pen and the conversation: these too are unified complexes – albeit in different sensory modalities (Dainton, 2007, p. 209).

My focus in this paper is semiosis, which I take to be a necessary step on the road to language. For these purposes, semiosis should be understood as an intermediate level between the most basic forms of structured communication, found across a range of species,¹ and human-style language in all its syntactic and semantic richness.² In particular, my focus is on three things I see as critical to understanding both semiosis’ origins and development in the species: the cognitive preconditions for its appearance, which I take to include phenomenal conscious experience; the nature of that conscious experience: in particular, its phenomenal unity, and how that unity should be approached; and, finally, the

¹ What Merlin Donald (1993) sees as dependent on episodic memory: that is, the capacity not just to categorize objects and happenings in one’s environment but to structure them into coherent episodes; see also (Parthemore, 2011, pp. 79–80).
² For a good introduction to semiosis in an evolutionary context, see Sonesson (2009).
nature of the accounts one is obligated to tell, when direct observations are necessarily lacking. Without these things in hand one will not understand the origins and development of semiosis; and without that understanding, one will not understand the origins and development of language. One will be left trying to interpret a jigsaw puzzle with key pieces missing.

The hallmark of semiosis is the capacity to employ at least semi-arbitrary signs for communicative purposes with conscious awareness of the distinction between expression and content (Lenninger, 2012, p. 1; Zlatev, 2002). When we engage in semiosis, we do so not just through the signs that we choose but through our bodies, and not just through our bodies but through all the other semiotic resources we can bring to bear – where “semiotic resources” are simply any features of ourselves or our physical or social environments that we can, on the fly, incorporate into the sign function. This makes them intrinsically multimodal (and at the same time, of course, amodal, in that they are independent of any particular modality). The spirit is precisely the same as the one in which extended mind hypothesis (Clark and Chalmers, 1998; Clark, 2008) talks about incorporating various aspects of ourselves and our environment into our cognition on the fly: thoughts, notebooks, feelings, calculators; what matters is not where the resources are located – “in” us or “in” the world – but what role they play. Indeed, the relation to extended mind will prove important in other ways.

The hallmark of consciousness – as of conceptual agency (Parthemore, 2016) – is the capacity for flexible, “reasoned” response to one’s environment. Though many attempts have been made to define consciousness, I will follow Joe Levine’s (2007) and Susan Blackmore’s (2010) lead in taking as a starting point the notion of “what it’s like to be a ...” (Nagel, 1974). That is, for certain cognitive agents, there is not just cognition but experience, including not just sensory experience but (not necessarily in any way explicit) experience of cognition. This is to say that phenomenality is, in one degree or another, an aspect of all mental states that are appropriately deemed conscious states – in direct opposition to the familiar access vs. phenomenal consciousness distinction (Block, 1995), whereby the two phenomena are meant to be mutually dissociable.

This implies that I intend “consciousness” and “conscious experience” to be more or less interchangeable. I will use “consciousness” where my focus is on consciousness in all its aspects and “conscious experience” when my focus is particularly on its experiential aspects. The central claim of this paper is that, just as understanding the origins of semiosis is necessary to understanding language origins (a point I will not attempt to argue for), understanding the conscious experience of semiosis as a simultaneously multimodal/amodal activity is necessary for understanding its origins and nature; and that in turn depends on a correct understanding of the phenomenal unity of conscious experience that Barry Dainton describes in the opening quote.

1.1. Phenomenal unity

The phenomenal unity of conscious experience is often taken to be one of the defining characteristics of consciousness (see e.g. Searle, 2007) along with wakeful awareness, directed attention, categorization, information processing, aboutness – the way that, on many accounts at least, consciousness is always consciousness of – etc (cf. Chalmers, 1995). Conscious experience is not a jumbled set of disparate and disconnected pieces; it is – under ordinary circumstances at least – always and only a coherent whole, as Dainton explains. On the one hand, such phenomenal unity may seem so basic as to appear, to some, to be something one just is conceptually obligated to assume: that is, it is something to use for building explanations rather than something itself to be explained. On the other, a number of researchers – notably Dainton (2007) – have made earnest efforts to provide an explanation for it.

The phenomenality and concomitant phenomenal unity of conscious experience are important to the onto- and phylogenetic development of semiosis in at least three ways:

- **Phenomenal primacy:** On certain accounts, phenomenal experience must come first, semiosis later. This is strongly implied by Jordan Zlatev’s (2009, 2016) semiotic hierarchy of nested dependencies where language presupposes semiosis presupposes culture presupposes consciousness presupposes life: each more basic level preceding and making possible the ones that follow. This is in contrast to the surprisingly common view – expressed, perhaps, most bluntly by Zoltan Torey (2009) but also attributed to Daniel Dennett (1995, 2008) – that language is prerequisite for having consciousness.5

Such an approach clearly seems to favour an innate universal grammar arrived at (directly or accidentally) through evolution; otherwise, how would language appear, without consciousness to guide it?

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3 ...Where conceptual agency is understood as the capacity to cognize in a systematically and productively structured fashion, as reflected in behaviour. For reasons discussed at some length in that paper and reflected below, I am inclined to see consciousness and conceptual agency as two sides of one coin, observing that, where people are inclined to attribute the one, they are generally if not almost invariably inclined to attribute the other; and where they withhold the one, they withhold the other. Such an assumption I take to be implicit in all but the most strongly reductive if not eliminative theories of consciousness – an assumption that, I think, if one is indeed making, one would be well advised to make explicit. As I argue at length in Parthemore and Morse (2010), concepts and experience are locked in a circular causal relationship whereby experience gives rise to concepts, which in turn structure experience, such that it is impossible for the conceptual agent to say how or where the circle begins.

4 ...As would require reflexive self-consciousness.

5 Torey writes (Torey, 2009, p. 123), “It was language that brought insight and thought and upgraded the primate’s behavior. To suggest that insight and thought as we know it evolved independently in the primate, and that language came along to give it expression, puts the cart before the horse.”
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