

UNCONSCIOUSNESS AS TIME TRAVEL

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The present article explores an, on surface level, counterintuitive implication of substance dualism, exemplified in its Cartesian manifestation, namely the problem of unconsciousness: If a rational agent's essence, i.e. constitutive property, is being conscious, and that we therefore cannot exist without being conscious, what happens when we become unconscious? Do we cease to exist upon becoming unconscious, only to reenter existence when we regain consciousness? In what follows I wish to illustrate a way that a dualist can bite the bullet while at the same time eliminating at least the worst violations of common sense, by pointing to the similarities between these gaps in a person's existence and time travel.

I will begin by sketching out the argument that allows for the problem to arise, before considering what conditions need to be met in order for a mind to be technically unconscious, the latter not being entirely obvious. Subsequently I will take issue with whether such technical unconsciousness is actually achievable, only to go on to provide an example which in my opinion does satisfy the conditions. Having that in place, I will discuss the problem in light of a (perhaps slightly pre-theoretic) conception of time travel, and argue that the two are in fact analogous. Finally, I will discuss whether this is in fact a problem for substance dualism, hoping to indicate that it is not.

1. Setting up the Argument

The first premise stems from the fact that Descartes defines the mind as a thinking substance – i.e., thinking is a constitutive property of the mind – from which it follows that if an object x does not have the property of thinking, x is not a mind (see e.g. Descartes 1985:210). Being a thinking thing, however, cannot be regarded as being engaged in the activity of thinking, but must rather be viewed as what is common to all mental activities. For Descartes the “faculties of willing, of understanding, of sensory perception and so on” (Descartes 1984:59) are only modes of the same mind. It is “the same mind that wills, and understands and has sensory perceptions” (Descartes 1984:59).² What inheres between all these properties is what in modern terms would probably be classified as consciousness: the phenomenal content, a notion of “what it is like” to experience. As Descartes himself put it: “I use [the] term [‘thought’] to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it” (Descartes 1984:113).³

The second premise needed to get the argument up and running is the fact that Descartes identifies the mind with the ego; the ego, and in effect any rational agent, *is* a mind, but *has* a body. Regardless of Descartes' defense of

this view, which I will not go into here (see e.g. Descartes 1984:16ff.), I believe this to be fairly in line with our naïve intuitions about the relationship between mind and body. For instance, if two people were to swap identities – i.e., x 's mind inhabits y 's body and vice versa – the identity follows the mind, not the body. Similarly, we say that a person dies when the mind, figuratively speaking, “leaves the body”, i.e. when there are no signs of consciousness. This means that having a mind is a necessary condition for an agent's existence; if a rational agent no longer has a mind, she no longer exists.

Having these two premises in place – that anything that is not conscious is not a mind, and that a rational agent's existence depends upon having a mind – it follows that when a rational agent is unconscious, she does not have a mind and consequently does not exist. In a valid argument:

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|---|------|
| (1) If a rational agent x exists, then x is a mind. | P |
| (2) If x is a mind, then x is conscious. | P |
| (3) A rational agent x is not conscious. | P |
| (4) So, x is not a mind. | 2, 3 |
| (5) So, x does not exist. | 1, 4 |

Seeing as I have already defended, or at least motivated, the first two premises, I will not go into them any more in what follows. Rather, I will focus on the third premise, and ask what it would actually take for a rational agent to be unconscious, given the definition of consciousness as “everything that we are immediately aware of”. Being unconscious would have to be the negation of this, loosely formulated as “not being aware of anything”, which is a rather demanding criterion.

2. Attacking Unconsciousness

In everyday language, we use the term “unconscious” in a certain way, usually synonymously with “comatose”; we say that we were knocked unconscious, or that you regain consciousness upon waking up from anesthesia. I will give two reasons for why this does not fulfill the criteria of unconsciousness; the first is an empirical one, the second conceptual. The empirical reason is rather straightforward: There is empirical evidence that people in comas are aware of their surroundings. Being a substance dualist, one might not wish to appeal to brain activity as a measure of consciousness, but there is also compelling evidence from people recollecting things that happened while they were comatose.

The conceptual reason is that being immediately aware is an extremely easy criterion to fulfill; it does not require you to remember, reflect, or recognize that you are aware, as long as you *are aware*. Another way of putting it might be that experiencing does not require past experiences, nor does it demand comprehension, or even contemplation, of the act of experiencing. Let me demonstrate by way of an example for each of these. That last claim is the most straightforward to illustrate, given that most of the time we do not go around contemplating our experiences; a sensation of red is normally not accompanied by an internal monologue discussing the nature of that sensation. So contemplation is obviously not a requirement. The penultimate claim, lack of comprehension, is, while not equally straightforward, also quite easily exemplifiable. To take a rather Cartesian example, you do not have to understand what happens when an oar has the appearance of being bent when descended halfway into water, but appears perfectly straight when it is no longer submerged, in order to perceive the difference.

As for requiring experiences, this is probably going to take the most far-fetched example. Say you suffered from both amnesia and short-term memory loss, so you did not have any memories and were not able to attain any new ones. You would still be having experiences – there just

would not be any record of you having them. In a way, this resembles dreaming. Most of the time you do not remember your dreams, but on occasion you do, and from that you infer that you are dreaming most of the time, an inference that can be backed up by scientific experiments. So, even though you have no recollection of your dreams, you still experience, and are thus conscious, even in your dreams. To put it in another way, you do not want to say that you are unaware when you are dreaming, because you are aware of the dream. Another argument to the same effect is that gaps in memory obviously do not constitute gaps in consciousness; even though you do not remember what you had for lunch on this day three years ago, you were almost certainly conscious when you had it. Ultimately, the amnesiac with short-term memory loss is just an augmentation of this scenario.

Granted that the reader is still with me and accepts my conceptual account of unconsciousness, it seems as if there is a major discrepancy between natural language ascriptions of unconsciousness and the operational account

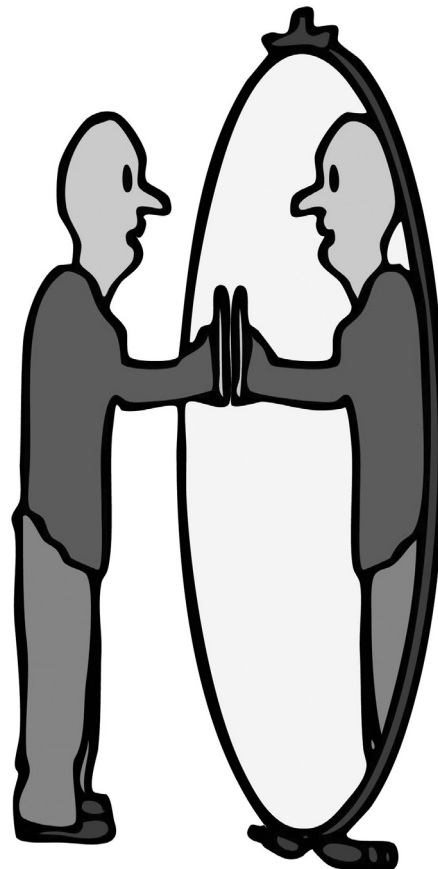


Illustration: Ashild Aurlien

of unconsciousness required for the *modus tollens* in (4). Additionally, it seems to be incredibly difficult to provide an example of operational unconsciousness in the actual world, having excluded death, which would not lead to the problem of reoccurring existence. After all, what possible state excludes all modes of thought⁴ (on Descartes' account, will, understanding, and perception)? Is it possible to provide an example, which would demonstrate the required level of unconsciousness? After all, Descartes' belief in the immortality of the soul should be a clear indication that he did not think that it was possible.

3. Achieving Unconsciousness and Travelling in Time

However, if we allow for slightly outlandish cases, there might be at least one example that I believe would constitute effective unconsciousness. Let's say that you were cryogenically frozen for a certain amount of time, say a year, before being defrosted and regaining consciousness. Provided that this is, if not physically then at least metaphysically, possible, it would presumably count as an

instance of reoccurring existence. Setting aside the problem with identity over time for the sake of argument, it is now possible for a rational agent to not exist at one time and exist both before and after

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it. Consider a time, call it t_0 , where a rational agent x exists prior to cryogenic freezing. Now consider a second time, call it t_1 , during the year when x is in a state of being cryogenically frozen, and consequently is unconscious. From the argument above, it then follows that x exists at t_0 , but not at t_1 . So far, so good: On this account, this is just what happens when you die. But consider a third time t_2 later than t_1 , where x has been defrosted and is conscious again. It now follows from the argument above that x does not exist at t_1 , but that x exists at both t_0 and t_2 , thus leaving a gap in x 's existence.

What are we to make of this? Is there a way of making it less counterintuitive? In my opinion, the comparison with time travel does provide a viable framework for analysis. If you look at what actually happens (according to the Cartesian dualist) – i.e., that x stops existing at one point in time and begins existing at another – it does in many respects resemble time travel. After all, ceasing to exist at one time and resuming existence at another does

seem to at least partially grasp our naïve intuitions about time travel. While it may not be a necessary condition for all instances of time travel, it does seem to be sufficient. This analysis does also conform to – that is, it is in line with – Lewis's (1976) definition of time travel as discrepancies between personal time and external time and Grey's "alternative chronological orderings" (Grey 1999:69), thereby providing further indication that the intuition seems to be on the right track.

Now what remains is to argue that the two cases are in fact analogous. The first point has really been made already, but the similarities between what happens in the cryogenic freezing scenario and the tentative definition of time travel above do line up rather nicely. Secondly, I do not find it entirely implausible that cryogenic freezing could be a method of time travel.⁵ If that is indeed the case, then arguing for the two cases being analogous is redundant, seeing as they are in fact the same kind of event. A third, albeit not as convincing, point is that phenomenologically speaking, instantaneous time travel and waking up from complete unconsciousness would be indistinguishable from one another; in both cases there is consciousness on both sides of a gap in time, yet there would not be any appearance of a gap from a first-person perspective.

What remains now is an account of what to make of this analogy. It appears to me that analyzing unconsciousness as time travel is a viable option for the Cartesian dualist, but what purpose is it supposed to serve? Well, as mentioned in the introduction, I believe that it provides an elegant way of accounting for a counterintuitive implication of the dualist theory of mind. As I hope to have demonstrated above, what it would actually take to be unconscious in the technical sense of the term requires such extreme cases as the cryogenic freezing example above. Granted that we are already this far into the realm of science fiction, if I were a Cartesian dualist, I would just bite the bullet and accept that we do in fact get temporal gaps in our existence when we become unconscious, but that this is just an instance of time travel. By doing so, the possibility of temporal gaps in our existence is no more mysterious than the possibility of time travel, which in my opinion is a mystery one can come to terms with.

4. Conclusion

In summary, I have presented a curiosity implied by Cartesian dualism that I called the problem of reoccurring existence, the phenomenon that a rational agent seems to go in and out of existence upon losing and regaining consciousness. Unconsciousness is to be understood

in a technical sense as the negation of consciousness, i.e. “everything that we are immediately aware of”, and for that reason, providing an instance of unconsciousness that would make the argument go through proved to be a demanding task. As a consequence, genuine states of unconsciousness are so unlikely to occur, if they can occur at all, that the problem of reoccurring existence does not seem to be as problematic as it was at the outset. In addition to this, I provided a framework in which these temporal gaps in existence were seen as instances of time travel, given a hopefully intuitive definition of time travel as ceasing to exist at one time and beginning to exist at another. This analysis and the rarity of technical unconsciousness can, in my opinion, constitute enough reason to maintain substance dualism even if confronted with this apparently counterintuitive consequence.

LITERATURE

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NOTES

- ¹ Thanks to Julie McGlynn, William Wong, and Matt Linsley in the Metaphysics of Mind group at the University of Edinburgh for the discussion that birthed the ideas developed in this article.
- ² Readers interested in Descartes’ division of mental faculties are referred to Descartes (1985:335f.)
- ³ See (Rozemond 2006) for a more thorough account of thought as consciousness; she even translates the quoted passage as “I understand by the term ‘thought’ everything that is in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it” (Rozmond 2006:48).
- ⁴ The most obvious candidate, anesthesia, is excluded by etymology alone, coming from Greek “an-aisthēsis”, meaning “without sensation”, thus excluding only one of the three faculties.
- ⁵ See for instance the novel *The First Immortal* by James L. Halperin (1998).