

Aspects of the unity of consciousness and everyday memory failures

Rocco J. Gennaro *, Douglas J. Herrmann, Michael Sarapata

Department of Philosophy, Indiana State University, USA

Received 13 January 2005

Available online 8 November 2005

Abstract

We argue that analyzing everyday memory failures in terms of the “unity of consciousness” can elucidate the bases of such failures. A perfect unity amongst one’s mental states is rare. In extreme cases the unity of consciousness can break-down in dramatic fashion (e.g., in Dissociative Identity Disorder), but such breakdowns also occur in less dramatic ways that affect us in everyday life. For example, disruptions in the unity of consciousness can result in everyday memory failures, such as forgetting to put on a tie for an important formal meeting. After providing some philosophical background into the notions of “unity of consciousness” and “functionalism,” we offer preliminary analyses of three examples of everyday memory failure. We then introduce and develop what we call the “unity model” of memory failure and show how it explains the examples. We also describe different ways that unity can break down which, in turn, can lead to memory failure and inappropriate behavior. We then show how slips of action and other kinds of cognitive failures (e.g., memory blocks) differ from everyday memory failures. Finally, we examine alternative models (e.g., Absentmindedness and Multimodal) arguing that the unity model is preferable, and then show how our model is consistent with some experimental results.

© 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Consciousness; Unity; Memory; Behavior; Slips of action; Cognitive failures

1. Introduction

In this paper we argue that analyzing everyday memory failures in terms of the so-called “unity of consciousness” can shed important light on the nature of such failures. More specifically, we first provide essential philosophical background into the concepts of the “unity of consciousness” and “functionalism.” We then offer preliminary analyses of three examples of everyday memory failure in light of such concepts, which leads to the introduction of three tables illustrating and developing what we call the “unity model of memory failure” while further showing how the model explains the examples described. We also explain the different ways that unity can break down which, in turn, can lead to memory failure. Because memory difficulties are sometimes attributed to *slips of action*, we then explain how they are similar to but also differ from everyday

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 812 237 2982.

E-mail address: rocco@indstate.edu (R.J. Gennaro).

memory failures. We distinguish everyday memory failures from other kinds of cognitive failures, such as memory blocks and lapses. We then examine alternative models (i.e. Absentmindedness and Multimodal) and argue that the unity model is preferable to and goes further than those alternatives. Finally, before offering some concluding remarks, we show how the unity model is consistent with some experimental results.

2. Philosophical background

The notion of “unity of consciousness” has played a significant role in the history of philosophy. For example, Kant (1781/1965) believed that the contents of our mental states must have a certain “connectedness” in order for us even to have coherent conscious experience. In an overview article on this topic, Brook (2001, p. 5) describes at least one notion of the unity of consciousness as “a group of representations (=mental states) being related to one another such that to be conscious of any of them is to be conscious of others of them and of the group of them as a single group.”¹ Similarly, Bayne and Chalmers (2003, p. 24) discuss the plausibility of what they call the “unity thesis;” namely, that “necessarily, any set of conscious states of a subject at a time is unified.”² Classic examples would be the phenomenal unity one finds in a normal case of visual perception or a case where one provides appropriate and clear answers to exam questions. We do not mean to suggest that all states within one’s unity of consciousness are *equally* conscious just as one is not equally conscious of all parts of one’s conscious visual field. It is also the case that some of the weaker conscious aspects of the unity of consciousness may take more time to retrieve. Moreover, one way that the unity of consciousness can breakdown is when the conscious subject is unable to access certain less focal states. As we shall see in the case of everyday memory failures, the unity of consciousness can breakdown for other reasons as well, such as when one of the conscious states is replaced by another or due to a shift in the relative strength among the conscious states within the unity. Of course, this presupposes that *at least some* time elapses over which the breakdown occurs.

On a related front, some have also argued that Kant held an early version of contemporary functionalism (Kitcher, 1990). As philosophers use the term ‘functionalism,’ it is the view that mental states are defined in terms of their relations to sensory stimuli (input), to other mental states, and to behavior (output). We are not defending functionalism as such or its ability to account for all aspects of consciousness, but merely pointing out how relating consciousness to behavioral output has played a prominent role in philosophy of mind. The key point for our purposes is to emphasize the connection or interrelatedness in content among an individual’s mental states as well as the fact that mental states cause behavior. We each have a variety of mental states, such as beliefs and desires, with an overlapping network of mental content. It should also be mentioned at the outset that the notion of ‘conscious’ or ‘conscious state’ that we have in mind is, to use Nagel’s (1974) apt phrase, “that there is something it is like to be in that state.”

Also partly due to Kant, the relationship between consciousness and memory has an important philosophical history. More recently, some have argued that memory or, at least, short term memory is necessary for consciousness (see Edelman, 1989; Gennaro, 1992). Of course, the philosophical problem of personal identity also frequently links consciousness and episodic (i.e., autobiographical) memory, especially since Locke (1689/1975). Unfortunately, however, it is rare that one enjoys a perfect unity amongst one’s mental states. We often forget relevant bits of knowledge even if only for a temporary period of time. We also have numerous unconscious mental states at any given time which can be importantly related in content to our current conscious mental states. Thus, some urge that we should think of such “connectedness” or “integration” as a matter of degree (see Baillie, 1993, chapter 8). Sometimes we simply temporarily forget something and therefore lose the normal integration among our mental states. In extreme cases, however, the unity of consciousness can

¹ It is important to note that although we use the more familiar phrase “unity of *consciousness*,” there is also a broader relevant category that we might call the “unity of *mind*” or “the unity of *cognition*” (Brook, 2001, p. 8) This is a kind of mental unity which extends to those relevant unconscious mental states as well, i.e., those mental states of which the subject is not aware. Of course, unconscious mental states can still play an important causal role in the production or prevention of behavior, but considerable research also supports the view that conscious and unconscious states can affect memory and attention differently (e.g., Jacoby, Yonelinas, & Jennings, 1997).

² Bayne and Chalmers also distinguish their basic unity thesis from a number of other kinds of unity, such as objectual unity and subject unity, but they are not most relevant for the purposes of this paper. See also Tye (2003) for another taxonomy of varieties of unity.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/927930>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/927930>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)