



Reply to Hobson: Can there be a First-Person Science of Consciousness?

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Allan Hobson praises and accuses me. He praises me for being empirically informed. And he accuses me of being a "third-person half-some-one" (p. 7). Specifically, he encourages me to come out of the closet, share some of my own first-person phenomenological experiences, and stop hiding behind neurophenomenological case studies taken from the existing scientific literature. Which I will do, below. But let us first begin with a matter of conceptual controversy.

I maintain that, strictly speaking, "first-person data" do not exist. This trendy concept is a fantastic tool if, for whatever reasons, you want to extend your audience into the realms of classical phenomenology or non-academic circles like certain pseudo-spiritual movements, adherents of various forms of alternative psychotherapy, or the sympathetic and romantic new-age subculture. Philosophically, however, this concept is irrelevant, because it rests on the fallacy of an "extended usage" of a concept that is well defined in another (scientific) context. „Data“ are something that is extracted from the physical world by *technical* measuring devices, in a *public procedure*, which is well-defined and well-understood, replicable, and improvable; and which is necessarily *intersubjective*. Therefore, speaking of "first-person data" would rest on an extended usage of a concept which is only well-defined in another context of application. If we don't want to fool ourselves by just introducing a new *façon de parler*, then we would need an independent justification for this new usage—which we clearly don't possess. Here is how Ludwig Wittgenstein put the point many decades ago:

Why shouldn't I apply words in ways that conflict with their original usage? ... In a scientific perspective a new use is justified by a theory. And if this theory is false, the new extended use has to be given up. But in philosophy the extended use does not rest on true or false beliefs about natural processes. No fact justifies it. None can give it any support. (*Culture and Value* ["Miscellaneous Remarks" 1914-51], tr. Winch. Oxford: 1980, p. 44)

As I explained in *Being No One*, “data” are gathered with the help of technical measuring devices (and not individual brains) and by groups of people who mutually control and criticize each other’s methods of data gathering (namely, by large scientific communities). In particular, data are gathered in the context of rational theories aiming at ever better predictions, theories that are capable of falsification. This is not to deny that “first-person methods” could have an enormous potential on our way towards a rigorous, empirically based theory of self-consciousness. Nevertheless, it is striking to see how those people who constantly talk about first-person methods do not practice them in their own research or lives, and how those who do have extensive experience with such methods typically remain silent and mostly refrain from making sweeping claims or drawing strong conclusions from their own subjective experiences in public.

Furthermore, the scientific method of gathering data has the unbeatable advantage that the process of gaining knowledge never stops: when a hypothesis is falsified, it is exactly at this moment (as Karl Popper beautifully put it) that we come into contact with reality. When disagreements surface, there is always a follow-up experiment that can be designed to keep the process of gaining knowledge alive. First-person phenomenology cannot offer this: if two meditators disagree about the content of their experience, there is no way to settle the dispute. Autophenomenological reports are contaminated by cultural background assumptions, by folk-phenomenological intuitions, and by the conceptual systems we use to describe these experiences. As modern neuropsychology has shown (e.g., in investigating anosognosia and other lacks of insight into existing deficits after brain injuries), there is a host of possibilities of how self-directed phenomenological reports can be sincere and yet express previously unnoticed deficits or simply errors about the contents of one’s own mind. If two phenomenologists disagree about the content of a subjective experience, there is no way to settle the dispute. This is because their reports are constructed and not given (data), and because they depend on many different factors, often unknown to the subjects of experience themselves. Of course, empirical data gathered with the help of the standard methods used in the hard sciences are highly constructed, description-dependent entities as well. But since this construction process is open to error elimination, it can be continually optimized. Third-person science is *driven* by conflicting statements. First-person methods typically *stop* with existing conflicts.

I actually do believe that scientific research programs on consciousness and its neurofunctional correlates *could* be greatly optimized if researchers were well traveled in phenomenal state space, if they were cultivated in terms of the richness of their own inner experience as well. But not because this would give them a mysterious kind of first-person “data”—more likely, because it would thoroughly shatter their folk-

phenomenological intuitions and endow them with completely new *theoretical* intuitions. What is right is that first-person approaches possess an enormous *heuristic* potential, and that we are currently far from realizing it.

But I don't want to evade Hobson's question. He demands that I write about personal experiences. Here is one:

At about 5:20 a.m. in the night of May 6th, 1986, I became consciously aware of the fact that I was sleeping and spiraled out of my physical body in a strange motion pattern. Standing in front of my bed, I immediately realized that, for the first time in many months, I had entered the out-of-body (OBE) state again. I was excited and extremely happy, and immediately began to experiment. I moved towards the closed glass door of the first-floor balcony in my parents' house. I touched the windowpane, gently pushing it until I could penetrate the closed glass door, and slid out onto the balcony. I flew down into the garden and landed on the lawn, where I moved around in the dim moonlight and looked at things. The overall experience was crystal clear.

When I became afraid of not being able to sustain the condition much longer, I flew back up, returned to my physical body, and awoke with a mixture of great pride and joy. I had not managed to make any verifiable observations, but I had done it again! In a clear, cognitively lucid way, fully controlled and without any intermediary blackouts.

I jumped out of bed, went over to my poor sister, woke her up, and told her, with great excitement, that I had just managed to do it again, that I had just been down in the garden, bouncing around on the lawn a minute ago. My sister angrily looked at her alarm clock and said, "Man, it's quarter to three at night! Why did you have to wake me up? Can't this wait until breakfast? Turn out the light and leave me alone!" She turned around and went back to sleep. I was a bit disappointed at receiving so little attention for such an exciting adventure. Also, I noticed that while fumbling with the alarm clock, she had accidentally set it off. It was beeping away the whole time, and I hoped it hadn't woken up anybody else. Too late! I could hear someone approaching...

At that moment, I woke up. I was not at my parents' house in the first floor, but in my basement room, in the house I shared with four other young people about 35 km away. It was not quarter to three at night, but the sun was shining and I had obviously taken a short afternoon nap. For more than five minutes I sat on my bed almost frozen, not daring to move. I was deeply skeptical about how real *this* situation was. I did not understand what had just happened to me. I didn't dare move, because I was afraid I might wake up *again* into yet another ultra-realistic environment.

In dream research, this is a well-known phenomenon (see Windt & Metzinger 2007). It is called "false awakening." So-called false awakenings are extremely realistic dreams of waking up, getting out of bed, having breakfast, leaving for work—and suddenly waking up again, realizing that one's previous experience of waking up was nothing but a dream.

While some false awakenings contain fantastic and unrealistic elements, their setting can also be extremely realistic and may present a near perfect facsimile of the dreamer's actual sleeping environment (Green and McCreery 1994: 65ff.). This high degree of realism and internal coherence, as well as the relative lack of bizarreness and fantastic dream elements, sets false awakenings apart from other types of nonlucid and lucid dreams. In terms of dream content, these *realistic* false awakenings are probably the most veridical type of dream, because they *anticipate* the events that would occur in the event of a real awakening. For instance, the dreamer experiencing a false awakening may try to write down his previous dream (see Green and McCreery 1994: 54) or, if currently participating in a sleep lab study, may try to analyse the polygraphic recordings of the corresponding period of REM sleep (see the report quoted below).

Here is my question for Allan Hobson: Did I really have an out-of-body experience? Or did I only have a lucid dream *of* an out-of-body experience? Can one slide from an OBE into an ordinary dream via the process we call false awakening? Or are all OBEs forms of lucid dreaming in the first place?

Now, we do not have first-person data, but an autophenomenological anecdote (AA). Did telling this anecdote really advance our scientific understanding of consciousness? In particular, in settling the theoretical questions associated with this AA—like determining whether OBEs and lucid dreams are *distinct* classes of the target phenomenon under investigation—does it really help to have reports of this type? Yes, it does help, because it supplies us with the raw material in searching for public, objective criteria that might distinguish different phenomenological state classes from each other, criteria that have to do with the brain and its functional properties. But if some yogi or an expert in Western phenomenology now wanted to doubt that my AA was descriptively accurate, if someone claimed that I was actually misdescribing my own experience, then there would be no way to make progress, no way to settle the dispute, no way to gather further knowledge with the help of “first-person methods” alone. The actual benefit I had from undergoing this episode as a researcher was that it shattered many of my theoretical intuitions about consciousness, for instance that the vividness, the coherence, and the crispness of a conscious experience is any indicator of the fact that you are really in touch with reality. Apparently, what we call “waking up” is something that can happen to you at any point in phenomenological time.

Hobson also states that in what he calls reducing the phenomenology of waking, dreaming, and lucid dreaming in order to make them tractable (p. 6), the concept of transparency is of no help, because all three of these states have this quality. This is not correct. The deeper and systematic philosophical relevance of lucid dreaming consists in the fact that it is our only obvious candidate for globalized phenomenal opacity: lucid dreaming is a global phenomenal state in which almost everything is subjectively experienced *as a form of mental content*. This is precisely exactly why it is relevant for philosophy of mind, and not simply because the fact that it is a rather rare and impressive phenomenological state-class. Lucid dreaming is interesting and important not because it provides us with fascinating AAs, but because it possesses a unique *theoretical* relevance for the problem of consciousness. Allan Hobson and I agree that comparative MRI studies of lucid and nonlucid dreaming would be desirable as a next step. But I think we need more than this: we need to make the lucid dream a replicable, experimentally

controllable, and predictably occurring phenomenon in the sleep lab. Allan Hobson will again accuse me of being a “third person half-some-one” (p. 7), but at the current stage, we have more than enough AAs, or phenomenological first-person reports, about lucid dreaming. What we rather need is a technological grip on the phenomenon, in order to first turn it into a repeatable phenomenal state-class across a large range of subjects. Only then can we conduct large-scale and systematic research programs - in order to convince those who, as Hobson writes, “rule out any study of subjective experience especially one as dubious and evanescent as lucid dreaming” (p. 7). And we already have a solid starting point: If Hobson’s own empirical hypothesis concerning of the functional role of the DLPFC in activating those levels of the human self-model that enabling the transition from an ordinary into a lucid dream points us into the right direction, then the correct conclusion is not that we should write and talk more about our lucid dreams (if we have any). Instead, we should search for risk-free, ethically tenable ways of activating the DLPFC in the dreaming brain of human subjects, so that it can functionally penetrate the already active dream self-model. The growth of knowledge both Hobson and I are looking for will not so much be achieved by generating ever more autophenomenological anecdotes or by engaging in and by endless philosophical debates on the possibility of a true first-person science of consciousness, but simply by concentrating all efforts on turning making lucid dreaming into a fully replicable and systematically inducible target phenomenon first.

References

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