It is often said to be obscure what work consciousness does in our cognitive lives; more bluntly, that it does no work whatever. I don’t think that is right. Experience of the world makes it possible for us to think about the categorical properties and objects it contains. That’s why experience is required for the most basic kind of understanding of perceptual demonstratives. You understand a demonstrative referring to a currently perceived object, like ‘that plant’, by singling out the thing visually.

The argument here is in three phases. First, that we do have the conception of categorical properties and objects. Secondly, that our abilities to think in terms of categorical properties and objects can’t be explained by the usual appeals to causal chains underpinning mental representations, or functional characteristics of mental representations. Thirdly, that our experience of the categorical does explain our ability to think in terms of categorical properties and objects.

I set out the main ideas of these phases in sections 1–3 below.

1. DISPOSITIONAL VS. CATEGORICAL

There is a difference between the family of dispositions an object has in virtue of having some categorical property, and the underlying categorical property itself. On the one hand, there is the collection of dispositions a round object has in virtue of being round: a tendency to roll when pushed, if it is made of sufficiently rigid materials, to leave gaps when stacked together with other things of the same shape, and so on. On the other hand, there is the characteristic of
roundness itself, in virtue of which the object has all these dispositions. We ordinarily take ourselves to have the conception of categorical objects and properties; we do not think only in dispositional terms. A simple way to see this is to consider our picture of what happens when you change the shape of an object; when you bend the leg of a chair out of shape, for instance. A multitude of dispositional characteristics of the chair are changed simultaneously: for instance, it will no longer support a seated person, it cannot be stacked together with other chairs, it will not stay upright, and so on. Did your action on the chair’s shape change each disposition separately, so that endlessly many different actions are somehow performed at once? Or do you change just one disposition, and as a consequence of your changing that disposition all the other dispositions are affected? Neither of these ideas expresses our intuitive picture of what has happened here. Ordinarily, we would think that you have changed just one underlying categorical property of the chair – its shape – and it is as a consequence of that change having been made that all these many dispositions are changed. When you affect an object, in general you affect the categorical thing itself, and it is in virtue of that change that the dispositions of the thing are changed. Similarly, we observe a distinction between a collection of dispositions that an object may have, and the categorical object itself that that grounds the existence of these dispositions. For example, objects have tendencies to transmit information over time. The oak tree has a capacity to keep the marks impressed on it. You may carve your initials the tree and find them on it 40 years later. But the oak tree is not a mere collection of such propensities to transmit information over time. The continued existence of the oak tree itself is the underlying categorical ground of all its propensities to transmit information over time.

Consider the hypothesis that there are no categorical properties and objects. There are only clouds of dispositions. We surrounded only by endless threats and promises. Suppose we said that all there is to the existence of an object is a collection of propensities to behave thus and so, perhaps in