Book review

The first-person approach and the nature of consciousness


Given the continuing explosion of interest in the nature of consciousness among philosophers and cognitive scientists, one would think that, by now, the level of phenomenological sophistication in these fields would be quite high. But this is not always what we find. This may be so because there is still widespread suspicion about the scientific value or reliability of first-person reflection. It is also often assumed that consciousness is the most obvious thing and so requires no special skill to describe. Another possible explanation is that we are in the grip of some theoretical bias that leads us to think that even the most complex examples of consciousness must be understood in terms of collections of simple “raw feels.”

Whatever the reason for this general lack of phenomenological sensitivity, Charles Siewert’s book *The Significance of Consciousness* represents an important and, I hope, powerfully influential move in the opposite direction. Siewert encourages us to cultivate what he calls “a patient, reflective appreciation of our own experience” (Siewert 1998, p. 339), an ability for which he displays a profound talent. Instead of relying heavily on examples like the experiences of redness or sweetness or painfulness and so on, we are usually asked to consider more complex examples of everyday conscious experience that better reveal its rich structure: the experience of something looking “sunflowery”; the difference between hearing an utterance and understanding it and hearing the same utterance without understanding it; the experience of it suddenly occurring to you that you left your keys on your desk when the phenomenally conscious aspect of that thought is not to be identified with the having of some kind of imagery; the importance of the temporal context of an experience in determining its phenomenal character. These are just a few examples of the many fascinating kinds of conscious experience that Siewert draws to our attention. The complexity and variety of our conscious experiences occupy center-stage in *The Significance of Consciousness*, an important corrective to many contemporary accounts of consciousness that tend to simplify what it is that needs explaining.
Siewert is right to insist that we can only expect to make progress in our explanations of consciousness if we clarify, to the highest degree possible, what the first-person perspective reveals about the nature of phenomenal consciousness in all of its varieties. His defense of the intentionality of consciousness, which occurs primarily in Chapter 7, is an especially good example of this. If we accept Siewert’s view that many phenomenal features are intentional features, this will have a profound impact on our approach to the mind-body problem. Siewert wants to leave this problem to the side in his book, since he thinks that we must clarify the notion of phenomenal consciousness before we have any hope of understanding its relation to the physical world. But we can still consider the implications. The close link between phenomenality and intentionality is not always appreciated, and this colors our accounts of the relationships that might exist between different levels of mental organization. Philosophers often assume that we can make a more or less neat distinction between the intentional mind and the conscious mind and that we are on the road to understanding how a physical system could have intentionality but clueless about how a physical system could be conscious. While resisting a strict identification of consciousness with intentionality, Siewert argues convincingly that the connection between intentionality and consciousness is much more intimate than many theories of mind would allow. If we are convinced by this, as I think we should be, then the explanatory puzzles take on a new structure.

This may be to our explanatory advantage or disadvantage. It may be that the mysteries associated with explaining consciousness should then infect our understanding of intentionality as well. My own suspicion, though, is that a clearer understanding of the intentionality of consciousness will result in a shrinking, although probably not a closing, of the explanatory gap. The puzzle of consciousness is most baffling if we think of conscious experience as the having of brute “qualia”, about which it may seem hard to find anything explanatorily enlightening to say. But the prospects are better if we drop the qualia view of consciousness and adopt an intentionalized view. As Robert Van Gulick has said: “The more one can articulate structure within the phenomenal realm, the greater the chances for physical explanation; without structure we have no place to attach our explanatory ‘hooks’” (Van Gulick 1997, p. 565). By taking the first-person approach seriously, Siewert’s account of consciousness opens up a potentially vast terrain where we might attach those hooks.

I think there is a tremendous amount of value in Siewert’s account of consciousness and especially in his refreshingly sophisticated and fruitful phenomenological descriptions of experience. But I also think that there may be problems with some of the details of Siewert’s conception of the first-