Cognition and Volition, or Reason and Will

1 A model for cognitional and volitional consciousness

There is a sense in which cognition and volition are taken for granted in Andrew Tallon’s argument for triune consciousness, for their status within the domain of consciousness is conceded from the beginning. With this concession, his concern is to argue the case for admitting feeling or affection to equal partnership with the readily acknowledged pair. The project is expressed, in effect, in the question: ‘Can feeling be at the center along with cognition and volition, intellect and will? (1997, 139). As a consequence, he does not provide a close analysis of either cognitional or volitional consciousness (or intellect and will). Again, with the focus on affection as a distinct form of consciousness with cognition and volition, there is also a sense in which the nature of consciousness itself is taken for granted in the inquiry.

In one commonly accepted view, consciousness is characterised as whatever we are immediately aware of, each in our own case, by introspection. This would include all forms of mental experience across the range indicated by the three categories in Tallon’s list, affection no less than cognition or volition. An account of this kind, associated originally with Descartes and long established in both rationalist and empiricist thought before being criticised by Wittgenstein and others in the twentieth century, has re-emerged (surprisingly) in cognitive science and related philosophical circles.1

A second common approach is to characterise mental experiences in ‘phenomenal’ terms, according to which a conscious state is one of ‘its seeming somehow to a subject’ or in which there is ‘something it is like’ for one to have it. Perceptual experiences (seeing red, for example), bodily sensations (tickles, pains), and feelings generally are seen as prime
candidates for this analysis, as well as imagining, remembering and episodic thinking; perhaps everything, indeed, that is included in ‘access-consciousness’. In each of these accounts, consciousness appears as a private world of which the subject alone can be aware. If so, the meaning of words relating to consciousness and its states would have to be settled by each individual for himself in a private and uncheckable performance. But words could not acquire meaning in this way, as Wittgenstein argued, for in the absence of shared rules the individual could not verify what he means on any particular occasion, and there would be no way in which one person could communicate with one another in this regard. Words acquire meaning only as part of a public language in which meanings are shared, checkable and communicable.²

Tallon does not discuss the nature of consciousness other than to make clear that it is connected with intentionality (which is not to say that every type of conscious state is intentional). He is also critical of Cartesian dualism (and of dualism generally). In itself this does not show that he would reject either of the commonly held views regarding consciousness just considered. For most proponents of these accounts also reject Cartesian dualism, while nonetheless accepting the view that consciousness, not intelligence or rationality, is the defining criterion of the mental. What tells against this, however, is that he aligns himself with Bernard Lonergan’s ‘critical realism’, and also with dialogical or existential phenomenology. In each case, consciousness is linked, in the first place, with immediate awareness of a shared environment, including other subjects of consciousness and a shared language, and hence with the range of operations in which one engages intentionally with the world in acts of perception, assessment, decision and the like. Even so, Lonergan’s own standpoint concerning consciousness also involves, as I will argue, a problematic element of privacy.

In search of a method of inquiry, as noted earlier, Lonergan holds that there are three ascending levels of cognitive consciousness – the empirical, the intellectual and the rational – capped by the responsible level on which ‘we deliberate about possible courses of action, evaluate them, decide, and carry out our decisions’ (Lonergan, 1975, 9). His focus is on the basic operations that characterise each level and the patterns of operation overall: sensing, perceiving, imagining, and so on, at the empirical level of consciousness; asking questions, getting insights, formulating hypotheses at the intellectual level; reflecting, drawing up evidence, judging the truth or falsity of statements, and so on, at the rational level; and, finally, the operations of deliberation, decision and action that mark the responsible level. These operations