The relation of acts and contents of consciousness / by Charles S. Myers.

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THE RELATION OF ACTS AND CONTENTS OF CONSCIOUSNESS [1])

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When, a few weeks ago, I received the honour of an invitation to address a Plenary Meeting of this Congress, I had already prepared for one of its sectional meetings a communication on the statistics of vocational guidance. This, however, seemed to me too limited in its scope to interest any general gathering of psychologists. And in looking about for a wider theme, I was inevitably influenced by the interest which I had recently been taking in the relations between mind and living body, as well as by the desire to choose a subject which might appeal to all, or to nearly all, the various 'schools' of psychologists. My choice, therefore, finally fell on the subject of consciousness; for this, even to the most extreme of 'behaviourists', must appear deserving of study, however alien he may regard it to 'scientific' psychology. And I endeavoured to select some special aspect of this subject which would be likely to be regarded as suitable for debate—neither, for example, the functional or spatial relations of consciousness to living matter, nor the relative primacy or importance of conscious and unconscious mind (both of these being too highly controversial problems, dependent for their solution largely on the particular 'school' of psychology to which the psychologist belongs—and I belong to none), but the several kinds, or 'modes', of consciousness and their interrelations.

Surely, so it seemed to me, we psychologists would all agree in recognizing three modes of consciousness—(i) the consciousness of mental activity itself, (ii) the consciousness arising from, and consisting in, the mental outcome of (conscious or unconscious)

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[1]) Published in the British Journal of Psychology XXVIII. 1933.

mental activity, and (iii) in some way closely related to the two foregoing—the affective consciousness. It is mainly the relation to one another of the first two of these three modes of consciousness to which I venture to direct your attention to-day—the relation between what are commonly called (*a*) the *acts* (or, to use a variant, but perhaps not quite equivalent, term, the *processes*) of consciousness and (*b*) the *contents* (or correspondingly, the *products*) of consciousness, or the conscious 'material' on which conscious mental work may be performed. In the brief time at my disposal I shall only be able to allude cursorily to the important third, or affective, mode of consciousness—the *feelings*.

I thought, too, that we might all agree in what is meant by the 'acts' and by the 'contents', 'products' or 'material' of consciousness. On the one hand, we readily recognize the conscious *acts* of apprehending, relating, recalling, etc.; on the other hand, distinct from these, are the equally obvious, conscious 'products' of those acts—*what* is apprehended, *what* relation comes to be discerned, *what* is recalled, etc. On the one hand, too, stand the conscious *acts* of attending, deliberating, deciding; on the other hand stands the conscious 'material' *to which* we attend, *about which* we deliberate, *on which* we decide.

We should further agree, I thought, that all conscious *acts* are acts of what we term the 'self' — in other words, that all conscious activity invariably implies self-activity, and that, without some kind of 'self' (however rudimentary) which might receive or act on the results of other mental activity within the organism, there can be no consciousness either of act or of product of mental activity.

It is evident, however, that not all conscious 'material' or contents appear to be the products of *conscious* activity: for example, we are not bound to be consciously thinking in order that an idea should occur to us, and we receive sensations from stimuli and perceptions of familiar objects without being consciously active of the processes of sensing and perceiving. Hence arose the notion of conscious 'presentations' *to* the consciously active self; and hence, too, we may, at first sight at all events, conclude that the *contents* of consciousness may occur under one of two alternative conditions, namely either as the result of, or in the absence of, *acts* of consciousness.

At first sight, too, we may be tempted to conclude that, just as

we may apparently have contents of consciousness without the necessity of having acts of consciousness, so we may have acts of consciousness without the necessity of having contents of consciousness. For we seem to be able to experience *an act* of apprehending, recalling or attending without necessarily experiencing *what* is apprehended, recalled or attended to. But I believe that this isolation of act from content is only apparent; it seems to me that we cannot actively attend, apprehend or endeavour to recall without attending to, apprehending or recalling something, however vague, indefinite, or irrelevant; a conscious act must yield a conscious product, even if it fail to take the form of a clear-cut and relevant percept, idea or relation.

But if 'acts' of consciousness are invariably associated with 'objects' of consciousness, may not conscious 'objects' or 'presentations' — *e.g.* the sudden sound of which we are forced to become aware or the idea which occurs to the mind—also really necessitate 'acts' of consciousness? We may admit that acts of sensation, acts of perception and acts of ideation may occur without involving conscious self-activity. But if, as I have premised, we are agreed that isolated fragments of consciousness are impossible, and that all normal consciousness is the resultant of one integrated and conscious self-activity, may it not be that the conscious products of unconscious mental activity (sensory, perceptual, ideational, etc.) become conscious by the act of being incorporated within that unitary mental system which we call the self, and that self-activity is essential for such incorporation? A sudden sound or an occurring idea would, on this view, remain unconscious until the self's activity — its act of attention (whether 'active' or 'passive')—had *ipso facto* rendered it conscious. And a similar attitude is applicable to the so-called unconscious wishes and unconscious feelings; we are powerless to describe them in terms of consciousness, *i.e.* as wishes or feelings, until they have become conscious.

We might on these lines be disposed to erect vast systems of *unconscious*, 'lower-level', mental activities engaged in building up *unconscious*, 'lower level', mental products which, in their final state of elaboration, may be presented to the mental system known as the 'self' and may, in virtue of the self's activity on them, ultimately become *conscious* contents or products. We cannot

possibly deny the occurrence of important, congenitally and fundamentally unconscious, directive mental activities, such as occur, for example, in the integrative processes of association, in the improvements which occur during rest after practice, in the processes of perseveration and forgetting, in the creative acts of genius, and in the processes of intuition, suggestion, volition, conflict and recall. But here the fundamental question arises— is the self something primordially separate and distinct from these lower-level activities? Because we have termed them 'lower-level', must they necessarily be *wholly spatially* at a lower level? In other words, does the self, in the course of mental evolution, owe its origin to the sudden emergence of totally new higher-level processes and its enrichment to the increasing entry and the complex integrations within the self of earlier and originally independent lower-level unconscious activities?

Is this a likely view? Or is it not more probable that the self is as old as the individual organism and that it has developed by releasing, by dissociating, consciousness from what now appear to us as lower-level unconscious mental activities? Is not the self rather primarily a diffuse, widely spread formation, and are not these so-called 'lower-level' mental activities secondary, often functional, rather than primary, spatial, formations? Regard, for example, the acquisition of habits within the life of the individual. Do they involve the cessation of self-activity and the relegation of mental activity to spatially lower, unconscious, levels? Is there a mental, and correspondingly a neural, system of the self, reigning, as it were, pontifically aloft, which functions only in the conscious learning of a new habit, ceasing to function any longer when that habit has been acquired and has become automatic? I venture to assert that we have no evidence, psychological or neurological, that different spatial 'levels' are involved according as a mental process is conscious or as, by repetition and familiarity, it becomes unconscious. I feel convinced that, whether or not an act has become habitual, whether or not in the performance of that act conscious self-activity occurs, the self is nevertheless in either case, but in different ways, active. The presence or absence of consciousness in self-activity must depend (*a*) biologically on the novelty of the situation and the need for adjustment, adaptation and direction of the whole organism, and (*b*) neurologically on the degree of resistance to,

or of easy flow of, the resulting response in satisfying and restoring those disturbances from equilibrium to which the whole living organism is incessantly subjected. In other words, the presence or absence of consciousness depends on the kind of self-activity involved— on the biological need for *directive* activity of the entire self, in *addition* to its mechanical activity.

I do not mean wholly to deny the occurrence of ontogenetic and phylogenetic integrations and syntheses from original parts. But far more important, so it seems to me, is the differentiation, the analysis, of original wholes. Wherever we meet with a living individual organism, there we have, in however rudimentary a form, a conscious self, with at least some powers of adjustment, creation and foresight, engaged (may I here be permitted to quote from another address) in "selecting from alternative responses and from alternative environments those which are most advantageous to the ever evolving and developing organism. To secure the most suitable movements and environment and thus to help in the evolution of the organism are the prime objects of consciousness; and where, as in plants, mobility and plasticity are at a minimum, self-activity and consciousness are inappreciable [1])". If my view is correct, self-activity is to be regarded as the primary, fundamental, general directive activity, and not as the 'highest' unitary integration of 'lower', originally independent, unconscious directive activities of the organism.

If this be the truer view, a vague diffuse glow of consciousness throughout the most primitive living organism has given place, in the phylogenetic evolution of mental life, to a more clearly defined, more restricted and more exalted, consciousness. That is to say, in the evolution of more complex living forms, lower-level, congenitally unconscious, mental activities have arisen by differentiation from what originally constituted activities of the conscious primitive self. According to this view, our humblest, purest, reflex action (which is unconscious both as regards act and product) is not the most primitive, but (in a sense) the most highly differentiated form of psycho-neural activity. And presentations to the self are to be regarded as the final outcome of the

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[1]) „On the Nature of Mind." The Presidential Address of the author to the Section of Psychology at the Centenary Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, London, 1931.

further evolution of higher self-activity— an evolution involving the differentiation of congenital lower-level activities never wholly distinct from the parent self-activity itself, which has, as it were, become 'distilled' from them.

Just as an acquired habit implies no entire absence of the self-activity which originated it, so sensation and perception in response to familiar stimuli or objects imply no entire absence of original self-activity (which is experienced indeed whenever a novel sensation or a novel percept occurs). Lower 'sensory' or even 'sensori-psychic' mechanisms and socalled 'centres' of corresponding neural activity there may well be; but they are not the centres (or seats) of *consciousness*, and they only function normally when they stand in normal relations with the entire organism on which the normal self surely depends. We have no right, then, to speak of independent, lower-level centres of conscious sensory or perceptual activity. Under pathological and experimental conditions these centres may reveal independent activity; but, like the behaviour of the spinal or decerebrate animal, their activity under these conditions is not identical with their activity in the intact organism. The same is to be said of those unconscious mental directive activities to which I have already alluded.

As we descend the scale of sensations, from visual and auditory experience, derived from *extra*-somatic stimuli, to kinaesthetic, thermal, algaesthetic and visceral experience, derived often largely or wholly from *intra*-somatic stimuli, we are able to trace a gradual change from *presentations to* the self (and their frequent projection as external 'objects') to *feelings* (or modifications) *of* the self. Clearly this affective mode is a far more primitive kind of consciousness than is the mode of contents of consciousness. Primordially, even colour must surely have been experienced as a mere 'colouring' *of* the self—an affective modification *of* the self, inducing and produced by self-activity. Primordially, then there were no presentations *to* the self, but merely modifications *of* the self.

Such must have been largely the conditions of conscious experience before the evolution of the cerebral cortex, during (and before) the evolution of the optic thalamus which is still primarily concerned with the affective, primitively sensitive and instinctive forms of mental life. We recognize, with the appearance

of the cortex, the development of higher intelligence, fuller discrimination, and the finer discernment of relations and meanings. But even in pre-cortical times, all these must, according to my view, have been rudimentarily present. Intelligence has not suddenly 'emerged' at a certain stage of mental evolution, superimposed on purely instinctive reactions. Experimental animal psychology has clearly demonstrated that meanings and relations (and all meanings depend on relations) are fundamentally inherent in all conscious experience, however rudimentary. All mind, all life, involves relativity; the absolute (like the absolutely new) is a *terra incognita*. Weber's law is perhaps the most fundamental illustration of the importance of 'context' for consciousness; the phenomena of contrast and adaptation constitute another. All consciousness and all response depend not only on the nature of the 'stimulus' but also on their relation both to past conditions and to the totality of present conditions.

Even in the primordial modifications or colourings of the self we may discern the rudimentary appearance of 'meanings'. For why should the self be differently modified or consciously affected by, say, a blue or a red light (or by a high- and a low-pitched sound), unless such difference in consciousness was *serviceable* in evoking different, conscious, selfdetermined reactions—one colour (or pitch) evoking one biologically useful group of frequently alternative reactions, another colour (or pitch) another biologically useful group of reactions? Is it not clear that one kind of stimulus would come to 'mean' one kind of reaction, another kind of stimulus another kind of reaction? For fundamentally, what is 'meaning' but the ultimate *use* of a particular excitation, the tendency to some particular kind of act resulting from it — in other words, what that excitation is related, to or associated with, what it 'stands for' — not, of course, absolutely, but relatively in regard to the total context?

Thus each affection of the self may be said to have acquired its special conscious 'colouring' through its relation to the special series of responses which is consciously evoked. The meanings which these affections acquire, as phylogenetically they evolve (in their natural and environmentally more complex forms) into primitive percepts and (in their analytic, more abstract forms) into 'pure' sensations, is something obviously different from the

later and fuller meanings ontogenetically acquired by percepts and ideas. Nevertheless, like all meanings, they are based on *relations*; and even at early stages there occurs too the *consciousness* of relations between conscious experiences, first as feelings of the self and later conjoined with the developing 'material' of consciousness.

But if, originally, conscious experience consisted merely or mainly in acts of the conscious self and in preceding and consequent modifications of the conscious self, how are we to account for the awareness of a persistent self, *i.e.* self-consciousness? This must have depended on continuity of activity, on memory—persistence and revival—on integration and disintegration, and thus on the formation of a single organized system of past experience, an ever active unitary stream of conscious awareness of *what* is acting and of *what* is being modified by such activity. This formation is, moreover, related to the two well-known kinds of memory—the memory of the *unique* individual acts of the self, and the memory of the sum total of corresponding modifications of (and later of presentations to) the self—the memory of unique acts of learning and the composite memory of what is learnt.

We may with advantage, I think, once again approach our subject from a standpoint other than a merely spatial one. Psychologists have long recognized the difference between the 'actual' and the 'specious' present—between a present which is an ideal moment of time and a present which is really a unitary blend of far longer duration. Is not the basis of this difference also the basis of the difference between the conscious acts of the self and the conscious modifications of and presentations to the self? Is it not, too, the basis of the difference between the conscious acts of the self and the conscious awareness of the self? Surely the very occurrence of continuity of activity and of persistence and recall, and the integration that yields awareness of the present (which is really a specious present), enable self-activity, with its powers of disintegration or dissociation, to become aware of its immediately past acts, to become aware of a self, and to become aware of modifications of that conscious self. Thus the self not only knows, but knows that it knows; it not only acts, but may regard itself as acting, and thus 'depersonalize' or 'distance' its acting; and, when subject to more fundamental

dissociation, it may exhibit all the remarkable and wellknown phenomena of multiple and alternating personalities.

If this view be correct, and if the 'material'—the contents or products— of consciousness is a mere development of modifications, or affects, of consciousness, then the notion of contents or products, is a misnomer. Ideas, percepts and sensations are not comparable to the contents of a filled living bag, nor are they comparable to the products of merely *mechanical* activity. They are of the very tissue of *directive* self-activity, and have appeared with the very appearance of self-awareness. They are an instance of that fundamental characteristic of continuous living process which consists in persistence and recall, in virtue of which the functioning of the self comprises not only its momentarily present conscious acts, but also the persistence and revival of immediately previous and long past conscious acts. These build up the awareness of a systematized, continuous self and the consciousness of modifications of that self by successive acts of the self. There can be little doubt that the contents of consciousness are of a more mechanical nature than the acts of consciousness; the latter consisting principally in directive activity, the former only inducing and being related to such selfactivity. But it would take us too far afield to-day to discuss this difference or, again, the differences between the consciousness of imaged and imageless, or of verbal and wordless thought, or of cognized and felt relations.

Originally, as I have tried to explain, the conscious self was so widespread as to include nearly every, if not every, mental directive act of the organism. In the process of evolution, independent direction became possible in the activity of lower differentiated levels, while consciousness became more and more restricted and exalted so that its presence came to depend on the activity of more and more highly differentiated, delimited and integrated, yet wide, areas of nervous tissue. And it is on this unitary integrating and disintegrating system that the acts and contents (as well, of course, as the affective side) of consciousness depend. The momentary activities of the self in the actual present give rise to conscious acts; its immediately past activities in the specious present through their continuity of origin contribute, with more remote revivals, to the generation of conscious products and affects and of self-awareness. Conscious acts and

conscious products are fundamentally not two unrelated modes of consciousness but are the expression of a common, ultimate, individual self-activity, distinguished, like all living activity, by evincing inherent direction, purpose, creation and struggle for existence, besides being subject to the blind, lifeless forces of abstract mechanical activity.