

A Wake Up Call

Comments on Philip Goff's "Property Dualists Should Be Panpsychists"

William S. Robinson
Iowa State University

Let me begin by saying that I am very pleased to have the opportunity to comment on Professor Goff's stimulating paper. I am going to resist his push toward panpsychism, but I believe he has raised an important challenge that property dualism – and a number of other views – must face up to.

Before explaining how to resist panpsychism, I want to step back and locate this challenge within a broader framework. The consequences that Professor Goff rightly labels "implausible" are discontinuities. Rejection of discontinuity is a contrapositive form of Leibniz' Principle of Continuity – the idea that there are no jumps in nature. Acceptance of such a principle leads to a problem in any case where we may want to allow for gain or loss of real binary properties.

Professor Goff's paper makes it clear that there is no problem with binary *concepts*. We can always get these by introducing threshold values. But if we propose that things can gain or lose real binary properties – as *being a conscious entity* or simply *being conscious* seem to be – then it seems we will be saddled with real discontinuities in nature.

There are two familiar contexts that require those who are not panpsychists to think about gaining and losing consciousness. First, it is *prima facie* plausible that there was no consciousness on Earth four billion years ago. But there is now. So, it seems plausible that consciousness must somehow have come into being. Against this view, however, we can advance Professor Goff's point in this way: The popping into existence of fully formed consciousness saddles us with an implausible discontinuity, but the gradual coming into existence of consciousness conflicts with our conception of what consciousness is. Moreover, as Professor Goff makes clear, it is at least difficult for the property dualist to hold that our conception of consciousness is mistaken.

The second familiar context that may puzzle us is that it at least seems that we lose consciousness at least once a day, i.e., when we fall into dreamless sleep, and regain it either in dreams or upon waking. Now, it may be that this is a deceptive appearance. We are conscious during the dreams we remember, and conscious during dreams that we have but do not remember. Maybe there is a kind of consciousness we have even when we are not dreaming at all.

But surely, if one wants to hold out for unending consciousness, that should be empirically supported in some way. It would be absolutely amazing if we could establish continuous consciousness when we are asleep by reflections from the armchair! But this means that any

plausible property dualism should at least be able to understand the possibility of daily episodes of losing and regaining consciousness. In short, Professor Goff's paper can be viewed as a wake up call – a call for the property dualist to give a consistent account of how it is possible to wake up.

I am going to do my best to provide such an account. But in order to do this, I need to reframe the discussion a little, so that I can give the property dualists' solution in terms that have an easy fit with the way I believe property dualists commonly think.

The key point is that creature consciousness is not basic. What is basic is, instead, episodes of consciousness. Being a creature such that there is something it is like to be it is being a creature that has episodes of consciousness of various kinds. Now, a thing can be composed of the same parts while having different kinds of conscious episodes. So, it is not simply a thing's composition that gives rise to its being conscious: its being conscious depends on what activity is going on in those parts.

An illustration may be helpful in seeing the point here. If a garbage truck were to arrive while I'm writing these comments, I would have a conscious auditory experience of a certain kind – one which I won't have if no such truck arrives. I don't need to be composed of different parts to have or not have such an episode of consciousness. What kind of episode of consciousness I'll be having depends on what is going on with my parts, not merely which parts I have.

Of course, there is a relation between processes and parts. You can't have boiling going on unless you have molecules of a liquid. You can't have an episode of a string vibrating at 440Hz without having a string. And similarly, you can't have a pattern of neural firings, which a dualist may think causes a qualitative event, without having neurons.

But, nonetheless, the natural way for a property dualist to think about consciousness is to think of it as depending on neural processes, rather than depending on a set of constituents. For this reason, it is a bit awkward for a property dualist to phrase the continuity problem in terms of replacement of molecules, as Professor Goff does in his pillar of salt illustration.

But the move to processes rather than parts is not a sneaky way of avoiding Professor Goff's problem. That problem re-emerges in a new formulation, as follows. Suppose we agree that to be a being for which it is like something to be it is to be a being that has (or can have, if it's in a dreamless sleep) episodes of consciousness, and that episodes of consciousness depend on neural processes. What if we now fiddle with the processes? We might, for example, lower the firing rate of some neuron. Maybe that will merely change the quality of consciousness a little – if it's a taste, for example, maybe the change in neural firing rate will make the taste a little bit less salty. But that will still be an episode of consciousness. Let's fiddle a bit more. Again, we will change the quality that's in consciousness, but not the fact of there being some kind of consciousness or other.

The implausibility – the new formulation of Professor Goff's *Implausible Consequence* – will be that it's implausible that lowering the firing rate of a single neuron from, say, 50 times per second to 49 times per second, should make the difference between there being an episode of

consciousness of some kind or other, and there being no conscious episode at all. Yet, it seems that if we agree that consciousness is an all-or-none property that can be gained or lost, then there must be some such discontinuity; some very small difference in neural processes that makes the difference between there being and there not being an episode of consciousness.

I am now going to try to explain away this apparent implausibility. To do that, I will need to do three things. I will (1) make a key distinction, (2) accept a real continuity for consciousness in its most basic form, and (3) explain why it seems to us that there can't be a real continuity for consciousness, even though there really is one.

(1) Professor Goff suspects that being conscious is not a complex property. (See p. 8.) I understand what he means, but I think that we do need to make a distinction among phenomena that are properly called "episodes of consciousness". Namely, as I shall put it, there are (a) episodes of qualitative consciousness *tout court*. (These may be either inattentive or attentive.) And (b) there are episodes of self-consciousness. This second class seems to me to embrace a range, from cases where subjectivity of experience is barely registered to full-blown introspection. I shall not, however, elaborate on distinctions within this range, nor will I say much about the difference between attentive and inattentive consciousness *tout court*. The key distinction is between (a) and (b). I regard qualitative consciousness *tout court* as the most basic form of consciousness, and most of my remarks will be about that.

To explain these distinctions a little, let's suppose that a garbage truck does in fact arrive. As I'm writing, I hear it. I am not thinking about it – I am absorbed in my writing. I may go on to attend to it, but in the first moment, I just hear it. That would be an episode of auditory consciousness *tout court*, and it would be inattentive.

Now, perhaps because I am expecting a package, I begin to wonder whether it's the garbage truck or the UPS delivery truck. I might attend to the quality of the sound and try to convince myself it's one or the other. That would be attentive qualitative auditory consciousness, along with the activation of a good many other mental abilities – for example, inner speech about the likelihood of the package arriving, imagery of going to the door to sign for it, and so forth.

Finally, I might say to myself that I am hearing a truck. That would be an episode of self-consciousness – a placing of the episode of auditory consciousness in a larger stream of episodes of consciousness of many kinds.

One way to get at conscious episodes *tout court* is to think about cases where, as one says, we are "lost in the moment" or "are in flow". Of course, what we know about such cases is based on remembering them (which we might do quite soon after undergoing them), and when we do that we are likely to be having a form of self-consciousness – we are likely to be thinking about our previous experience as *ours*. But what we seem to remember – the remembered episode itself – is an episode of consciousness just by itself that was not, at the time, accompanied by any thought of its being ours.

(2) My remarks in this second section about the real continuity that property dualists should – and, more importantly, can – accept are offered solely for episodes of consciousness *tout court*. I will return to self-consciousness in the remarks in (3).

In this section, I will also suppose that we really do lose consciousness at some point in our sleeping hours, and that, of course, we regain it (both when we dream and upon waking).

In general, we have many qualities in our qualitative consciousness at any one time. But we can imagine seeing while not hearing anything, tasting something with our eyes closed, and so forth. And we can imagine that some instance of seeing (or hearing, or tasting) involves only one simple quality. For simplicity of discussion, let us focus on a simple case of this kind.

So, for example, perhaps I am having an episode of auditory consciousness characterized by a single sine tone. Let us imagine that this sound decreases in intensity. It decreases more, and continues to decrease. Now it is faint . . . fainter . . . is it still there? yes . . . maybe . . . no. In neural terms (in terms of what a property dualist is likely to regard as the causes of our consciousness), what's happening is that some pattern of neural activity is growing progressively less different from absence of pattern. That is, it is growing progressively less different from what we might call "neural noise", i.e., random neural firing. ("Neural noise" is the proper contrast to having neural causes of qualitative consciousness, since even in what are at least apparently conditions of dreamless sleep, our neurons continue to fire from time to time.)

We have arrived at the "real continuity" that I said property dualists can consistently allow. The proposal is that the gradual disappearance of auditory quality is the gradual disappearance of an episode of consciousness. What consciousness, in the most basic sense, *is* on this proposal, is occurrence of qualitative events, and when the quality goes, so does the consciousness. The quality goes gradually, and so, so does the consciousness. When the neural causes of consciousness reach indistinguishability from neural noise, we no longer have a cause of qualitative consciousness, and we have reached absence of consciousness.

As to pillars of salt, they do not have the kind of internal complexity that permits the kind of occurrence of patterns that are nomologically related to episodes of consciousness. So, they have no consciousness. They cannot have any; they are not conscious beings at all.

This solution may appear to show too much for its own good, because it may appear to rule out the phenomenological suddenness of some of our episodes of consciousness. Imagine, for example, that I am quietly working on a warm day in Spring, and that several doors and windows are open. A sudden breeze comes up and I am startled when a door bangs shut. The bang seems like an instantaneous onset event. So, shouldn't we allow for instantaneous onsets of conscious, qualitative events?

I think the proper answer is "No". What we can and should allow for is only very steep rates of change. I believe this response will be found plausible if one thinks about the neural causes or correlates of consciousness. The neural transitions that go with hearing the door slam are very rapid – something to be measured in milliseconds – but they are not strictly speaking instantaneous.

There is also the fact that whenever we reflect on the experience we have in cases like the door's slamming, we are relying on memory. Our memory does not, it seems, encode a rising

consciousness of the noise of a slamming door. It does not follow from that that the onset of such a noise in our consciousness has no rising curve – i.e., it does not follow that the difference between silence and loud slam experience is literally instantaneous.

Finally, unless you have been training yourself, you probably do not distinguish the attack phase of a note on a piano from the rest of the note. But we are sensitive to such small events, even though we do not consciously distinguish them. This comes out in the immediately noticeable peculiarity of music that is electronically altered so that there is no distinction between the attack phase and the rest of the note.

Before going on, it will perhaps be helpful to note that some physicalists also need to account for gain and loss of consciousness, and may find the account I have given here to be useful. I have in mind those physicalists who are ‘conceptual dualists’ – that is, who allow that our concepts of phenomenal qualities (and the events in which they occur) are different from our concepts of neural properties, but that the properties themselves, of which these two sets of concepts are concepts, are identical. For holders of such views, the coming to be of a pain, an afterimage, a taste, a sound, and so on just are the comings to be of neural events of certain kinds. And now, Professor Goff’s challenge can be raised against them in the following form.

“It is an implausible view that the difference between a neural event type that’s identical with a phenomenal quality type, and a neural event that is not identical with any phenomenal quality type, could consist in whether some neuron fires at 50Hz rather than 49Hz. So, you must allow that, despite common views to the contrary, there is consciousness in all neural processes – and, by similar reasoning, perhaps in all processes everywhere.”

To respond to such a line of criticism, I think a conceptual dualist might very well want to have access to a view that allows for gradual degeneration of distinctive neural patterns toward neural noise and, correspondingly, gradual degeneration of phenomenal qualities toward absence of phenomenal quality.

(3) In this third section, I am going to relax our focus on consciousness *tout court* and consider the role of self-consciousness in our thinking about the matters of Professor Goff’s paper.

One obvious point to make is that the fading out of one phenomenal quality – e.g., a sharp taste gradually fading to no discernible taste as our saliva dilutes the seasoning, or a sound fading to nothing as its source recedes into the far distance – is not remotely the disappearance of all of our consciousness. That is because (i) we are usually having experiences in several sensory modalities, so even if we are not conscious of any sound or taste, we are still having episodes of visual or olfactory or some other kind of sensory consciousness. And (ii) we are often talking to ourselves, which involves auditory imagery, which also consists of episodes of consciousness. There are, in addition, what Mangan [1] has called “fringe” states of consciousness – such things as feelings of confidence, a sense of rightness or “fit” between what we take ourselves to see and what we expected, a sense of familiarity of a face or of our surroundings. And there is the pleasantness or unpleasantness of our experiences.

The list just given is a list of ways of being conscious, and if any of them are present, we are conscious. So, if we are aware of the fading of a sensory quality, we do not (and should not) think of that as a fading of consciousness in all its forms – there is plenty of other consciousness that is *not* fading. This fact is part of what accounts for our intuition that consciousness is an all or none affair.

But there is more behind that intuition. When we think about the issues raised in Professor Goff's paper, we are reflectively conscious. Such reflection does seem to be all or none. That is, while we may be clear or not so clear about what we think, and we may be confident or not so confident about what we think, there does not seem to be anything that is naturally described as being "sort of reflectively conscious" or "half reflectively conscious".

There can, indeed, be cases of being *inattentive* in our reflections. For example, the arrival of a garbage truck may distract me, but not completely, so I can be in a state where I'm still thinking about writing these comments, and even thinking that it is I who am writing them, but where my full attention is not on the issues I'm writing about, or the fact that I am writing. But when I reflect on a state of this kind, it does not seem to be one of "less consciousness" – it is, instead, a complicated state of consciousness that involves partial attention to several items. To put the point as a slogan: I may be half-focused, but not half-conscious.

We can also think of sudden onsets and offsets of reflective consciousness. To imagine such a case, think once again of a time when you were "in the moment" or "in flow", where you were completely taken up with some activity – e.g., playing tennis against a well-matched opponent. One can sometimes get distracted out of such states in a particular way – namely, by becoming self-reflective (which typically reduces one's ability). Such onsets of reflection are the bane of actors and musicians – the last thing one wants to happen when performing is to have thoughts intrude about the fact that one *is* performing, or questions about how one is doing in one's performance. But they do happen, and our memory of such situations makes it seem that at one moment we were not reflective at all, and then suddenly we were. This impression may contribute something to our thinking of consciousness as "all or none". But, evidently, sudden onsets and offsets of *reflective* consciousness are not in conflict with the possibility of gradual onset and offset of consciousness of the more fundamental kind; that is, consciousness *tout court*.

But perhaps we have got out of the frying pan only to find ourselves in the fire. Why isn't the sudden onset or offset of reflective consciousness just another implausible discontinuity? – But here, we can avail ourselves of the solution offered in the slamming door case. That solution had two parts, namely, steep rates of change rather than literal discontinuity, and memory encoding of plateaus reached to the exclusion of the evanescent passages from valleys to plateaus.

When we are thinking about the issues of this conference, we are reflective and we are prone to thinking of consciousness as preeminently the kind of thing we are undergoing when we are doing this kind of thinking. And we have nothing that we naturally think of as doing *this* kind of thinking in a halfway, or quarter way fashion. So, it is apt to seem to us that consciousness is an all-or-none affair.

But I am holding out for the view that consciousness *tout court* is consciousness indeed, and that

it can fade. The auditory imagery of our inner speech does not fade in the way that external sounds do when their causes recede, but there is no reason in principle why it could not do so. It seems plausible to me that the physiological conditions that would make our auditory imagery in inner speech fade are also ones that impair memory (a notorious phenomenon in connection with dreams). So, for all I know, when I fall asleep my inner monologue fades away and I just don't recall those moments.

This view, I admit, makes me somewhat uncomfortable, because it attributes a property to experience that cannot be attributed to it on the basis of introspection. But I think that there are other cases in which the limitations of our cognitive apparatus must be invoked to deal with very refined questions.[2] I think it is evident that the issues raised by Professor Goff's paper take us into a territory that we do not encounter in ordinary life, and in which we have no reason to trust intuitions that serve us well in everyday thinking.

To sum up: Professor Goff's paper forces property dualists, and some others, to explain how they can avoid implausible discontinuities. The problem is real but, I have argued, there is a solution other than panpsychism. The core of this solution is to allow continuous transition from neural activities that do not cause consciousness to neural activities that do cause consciousness *tout court*. The remainder of my remarks answer objections and seek to explain away the appearance that the proposed continuity is incompatible with our conception of consciousness.

[1] Mangan, B. (2001) "Sensation's Ghost: The Non-sensory "Fringe" of Consciousness", *Psyche*, 7(18). Available at <http://www.theassc.org/files/assc/2509.pdf>

[2] Another is the apparent violations of transitivity of identity in very gradually changing spreads of colors. I've discussed this in the last chapter of W. S. Robinson, *Understanding Phenomenal Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).