LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Demystifying Consciousness and Non-cognitive Theories of Consciousness

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Abstract

In "A conceptual framework for consciousness," Michael Graziano provides a substantive conceptual framework for explaining consciousness. In this commentary I will focus on the way Graziano sets up the issue, which fails to capture the opposition accurately. The opponent of Graziano's approach is no mysticism, but non-cognitive theories exemplified by, e.g., Ned Block's Overflow thesis. Without identifying the opponent accurately, its significance cannot be fully appreciated. In this commentary I attempt to capture the real disagreement to facilitate further communications.

Key Words: consciousness, attention, mysticism, functional analysis, cognitive theory

In *"A conceptual framework for consciousness,"* Michael Graziano provides a substantive conceptual framework for explaining consciousness. It begins with a statement of the "problem" of consciousness and proceeds to elaborate two general principles that jointly yield the conceptual framework he recommends. Then it argues that the Attention Schema Theory (AST) embodies the two principles and the framework, and that the theory is supported by various recent empirical evidence. Finally, it concludes with some discussions of the evolution of consciousness and what AST can and cannot explain. Here I shall not question the two principles and the conceptual framework; rather I will focus on the way Graziano sets up the issue, which fails to capture the opposition accurately, and as a result it is more difficult for him to convince those who are not already in his camp. Graziano writes,

> The reason for the apparent intractability of the problem [of consciousness], I argue, is the component of *mysticism* that has lured scholars (and casual lay philosophers) away from a simpler underlying logic. (p. 2; emphasis added)

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It is true that mysticism tends to create the (apparent) intractability of certain problems, but very often the (apparent) intractability can be in place without any mysticism, assuming the usual meaning of that term. In attributing mysticism to his critical targets, Graziano misconstrues the dialectic. In particular, when he describes the hard problem of consciousness, he writes that according to the problem, "[e]xperience is nonphysical" (p. 2), but this is never how the problem should be formulated: if this statement is how the hard problem is set up, then it is easy to set it aside, as long as one rejects nonphysical stuffs and phenomena. Rather, the hard problem arises because consciousness, being a subjective phenomenon, seems to defy *functional analysis* (Chalmers, 1995). Now, we can deny that consciousness is actually functionally unanalysable, but in this disagreement *as such* no one asserts that consciousness or experience is nonphysical. Some people might endorse the hard problem because they think experiences are nonphysical, but the hard problem arises independently of the controversial assertion that experiences are nonphysical.

The accurate opposition is actually between *cognitive* theories and *non-cognitive* theories of consciousness. As Graziano notes, his framework "is related to a longstanding approach that dates back at least to Dennett in 1991" (p. 1), and the term "illusionism" can be misleading. Dennett (1978) dubs his approach "cognitive theory," which is apt for Graziano's purposes. He is right that a large cohort of researchers have converge at this point (e.g., Rosenthal, 2006; Metzinger, 2009; Carruthers, 2012; Churchland, 2013), but the accurate contrast is not with mysticism, but with *non-cognitive* theories. Just consider one example: Ned Block has been proposing that consciousness overflows attention (2007, 2011, 2018), which is incompatible with Graziano's AST, and is a non-cognitive yet non-mystical theory. With this accurate contrast in place, Graziano's framework can be better understood as a new cognitivist framework, and whoever can demystify consciousness, non-cognitivist theories Graziano opposes should be demystified too.

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