

## John Searle on Features of Ordinary Consciousness

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Searle [1] proposes that ordinary consciousness is pervaded by a sense of viewpoint<sup>1</sup> and intentionality. He writes: "My conscious experiences, unlike the objects of the experiences, are always perspectival. They are always from a point of view" (1992:128). Ordinary consciousness exhibits what Searle calls aspectual shape.

A second feature of ordinary consciousness is the awareness of events and objects as being extended temporally and spatially. Temporal and spatial extension, however does not extend to consciousness itself (1992:127), but rather to the object of one's perception.

Searle refers to the experience of the five senses, bodily sensations experienced as pleasant/unpleasant, stream of thought, or sudden insight as expressive of finite modalities.

A fourth aspect of ordinary consciousness, familiarity, is the most pervasive of the aspects of consciousness. It makes possible the grouping and organizing of conscious experiences. Because perceptions are organized according to categories, unfamiliar experiences are assimilated into categories of the familiar (1992:128).

Next, conscious states are normally unified. Experiences happen either sequentially and are organized horizontally over short stretches of time; or they occur simultaneously presenting an awareness of various features at once, similar to Kant's "transcendental unity of apperception" (1992:130). Searle distinguishes between horizontal and vertical unity. Horizontal unity is the sequencing of events into a "remembered present"; while vertical unity is the drawing together of diverse and simultaneous perceptions into a unified column of understanding. To make sense of our experiences, both forms of unity are essential.

Another of the features of ordinary consciousness is what is termed center and periphery (1992:139). In ordinary consciousness, there are differing levels of attention to background noise, for example. In a crowded, noisy room one may not hear the noise of a clock, but might be aware of music in the background or of a dog barking outside. These noises are on the periphery. One may be conscious of them, but may not attend to them. However, if all the other noises were removed from the room and the radio were left on, the sound of the radio would possibly move from the periphery to the center of one's conscious awareness. Or, perhaps if there were no one present and no radio playing, the noise of a clock ticking or a tap dripping would move from periphery to center.

Overflow is another interesting characteristic of consciousness. It refers to the phenomenon that occurs when conscious experiences refer beyond their immediate content and connect with previous experiences, awareness, or thoughts. This is the feeling of connection that happens when one experience triggers an awareness and memory of another of a similar kind of content in which the thoughts are somehow connected as part of the content, but in another sense not part of it (1992:139).

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<sup>1</sup>In "stream of consciousness" writing of authors like James Joyce, there is an absence of a continuous and consistent point of view.

The last of the features of consciousness to be discussed is subjective feeling. This involves the sense of what the conscious state “feels like” (1992:131). When it is reported, the “what-it-feels-like” is expressed in real or metaphorical terms. Sometimes feelings are named; sometimes they are merely alluded to, or described in some detail.

In conclusion, Searle’s presentation of elements of consciousness highlights the structured nature of perceptions, the quality of perceptions, the Gestalt of conscious experience, aspects of unity, intentionality, familiarity, feeling, mood, tone, color, organization of consciousness and spatio-temporal aspects.

### Bibliography

1. Searle John. “The Rediscovery of the Mind”. London: The MIT Press (1992).

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