

---

# Individuation, Integration, and the Phenomenological Subject

A Reply to Tobias Schlicht

[Kenneth Williford](#)

---

Tobias Schlicht argues that subjective character derives from the integration of mental states into a complex of representations of the organism and that therefore there is no need try to account for subjective character in terms of “reflexivity” or self-acquaintance, as I do. He further argues that the proper subject of consciousness is the whole organism and not the episode or stream of consciousness, as I maintain. He maintains that his account solves problems about the individuation and synchronic unity of conscious mental states that mine does not. While I agree that we need an account of the individuation of episodes of consciousness and an account of the synchronic and diachronic unities of consciousness (something I bracketed in my paper), I disagree that making the organism into the phenomenological subject of consciousness helps with these problems. However, I am willing to concede that the organism is the subject of consciousness in some non-phenomenological sense.

## Keywords

Conscious vs. unconscious mental states | Individuation | Integration | Organism | Phenomenological subject | Reflexivity | Self-acquaintance | Unity of consciousness

## Author

[Kenneth Williford](#)  
williford@uta.edu  
The University of Texas  
Arlington, TX, U.S.A.

## Commentator

[Tobias Schlicht](#)  
tobias.schlicht@rub.de  
Ruhr-Universität  
Bochum

## Editors

[Thomas Metzinger](#)  
metzinger@uni-mainz.de  
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität  
Mainz, Germany

[Jennifer M. Windt](#)  
jennifer.windt@monash.edu  
Monash University  
Melbourne, Australia

## 1 Introduction

In his insightful commentary on my contribution to *Open MIND*, Tobias Schlicht argues for the following claims: (1) The subject of conscious episodes should be identified with the organism whose episodes they are ([Schlicht this collection](#), pp. 2, 8-9). (2) Once we understand how non-conscious mental states (perceptions, thoughts, etc.) become conscious by being integrated into the underlying organismal creature-consciousness, we will have understood all that is important about how a

conscious state is endowed with subjective character ([Schlicht this collection](#), pp. 5-6). And, (3), such an account would obviate an account like mine, since there would be no need to imagine that individual episodes of consciousness have a sort of self-contained subjective character (which I construe in terms of “reflexivity” or self-acquaintance)—instead, their subjective character would just derive from their integration into the underlying creature-consciousness, which *ipso facto*

makes the organism to be the subject-pole of the episode (Schlicht [this collection](#), pp. 5-8).

Part of claim (3), as stated, (the part that begins with “since”) is my interpretation of Schlicht, since he does not spell out the claim in great detail, given limitations of space. So my arguments directed at that interpretation may not target exactly what Schlicht had in mind. But claims (1) and (2) are stated very clearly (Schlicht [this collection](#), pp. 5-6, 8-9). In this reply, I will take issue with these three claims and discuss some of Schlicht’s other claims in relation to them.

## 2 The phenomenological subject and the organism

I readily admit (and did so in the contribution) that the claim that the subject of consciousness is the episode (or stream) of consciousness itself is rather counterintuitive.<sup>1</sup> However, part of this counterintuitiveness can be ameliorated easily enough. To begin with, I should have made clearer that I was talking about what I like to call the “phenomenological subject” of consciousness. I did use the phrase, but I did not explain it and should have done so. The phenomenological subject is just *that to which* the objects of phenomenal consciousness *seem* to appear. In other words, granted that consciousness seems to have a subject-object, relational structure, the phenomenological subject is just the subject-pole of conscious experience in so far as it is given (reflectively as well as pre-reflectively).

Now, suppose we interpreted the Humean “no-self” intuition in the strongest possible way. In that case, we would conclude that there is no phenomenological subject at all. As I argued in the paper, I think the Humean intuition is not to be dismissed. However, I do think that the subject-object polarity of consciousness is a datum and not projected or inferred. If one is already sympathetic with the idea that consciousness is always aware of itself (is its own “secondary object”, as Brentano put it (see

Brentano 1995, pp. 128ff.), or is always non-positionally conscious of itself, as Sartre put it (see Sartre 2004, p. 8)), then it is not much of a stretch to identify this feature of “reflexivity” with subjective character and, if we must reify, make the episode or stream into the phenomenological subject. As long as one understands that by “subject” here, I just mean the subject-pole of conscious experience, a pole that one is phenomenally conscious of, then one will get my meaning. Given a commitment both to some version of the Humean intuition and to the intuition that one is phenomenally aware that consciousness has a subject-object polarity, one will need to resolve the tension between these in some way. Self-representationalism and self-acquaintance theories can do this in a very elegant way, I argued, a way that neither first-order nor higher-order representationalisms can. All of this is compatible with the evident fact that we normally experience ourselves as having a body in space that bears various relations to objects in space; but the phenomenological subject of consciousness should not, in my view, be identified with the body or with a representation of the body.

One might, of course, use “subject of consciousness” in different ways. One might, for example, mean “that organism or system to which we attribute consciousness” or “that which is the substrate of consciousness in an organism”. We might then speak of the “metaphysical subject” or “ontological subject” of consciousness, rather than the “phenomenological subject”. The metaphysical subject of consciousness need not appear to or be represented in consciousness. I have nothing against the idea that the organism (or a set of sub-processes of it) is the metaphysical subject of consciousness. I grant, moreover, that we normally speak in such a way that the grammatical subject of attributions of consciousness (or conscious mental states) is a noun that refers to an organism. We say things like “Skipper, my dog, sees his food coming” or “The bird saw me walking toward it and became frightened”. Indeed, insofar as consciousness is a property of or process going on in the brain of organism, there is nothing erroneous about such attributions. However, given the

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, after hearing me present a version of the target paper (at TCU in 2014), Michael Tye told me that even on a charitable reading, the claim lacks a truth value. At least, that’s what I understood him to mean.

falsity of animism and the commitment to what I like to call encephalism (the view that consciousness resides in the brain), the ontology of consciousness cannot just be read off of the grammar of such attributions, not that Schlicht is suggesting that it could.

It would, however, be more accurate to say in the Skipper case that there is a process of phenomenal visual consciousness having such-and-such representational content and being connected in such-and-such a way with Skipper's volitional, appetitive, and motor systems (all, of course, related to Skipper's organismic homeostatic systems) going on in Skipper's brain when, in normal conditions, the food is presented to him. Of course, I just referred to Skipper *qua* organism multiple times in reformulating this apparently simple attribution, but that just has the effect of roughly localizing the conscious process and, of course, connecting it to Skipper's behaviors and functions as an organism. No one should deny that consciousness, as it has arisen in organisms with an evolutionary origin, has a biological function, though it is highly debatable that consciousness should be defined or analyzed in terms of such functions. It may well be that it serves these organismic functions but could exist in substrates that do not have them or need them. In fact, I would put my money on the claim that artificial consciousness is possible in systems whose homeostatic functions can be carried out in a way that its consciousness does not contribute to *at all*. But that is a debate for another time.<sup>2</sup>

The counterintuitiveness of claiming that the phenomenological subject of consciousness is the episode or stream of consciousness might derive in part from the oddness such a view would seem to introduce into our quotidian attributions of conscious mental states, if we were to try to make our ways of speaking match this theory. It would be rather odd indeed to say, "Skipper's current episode of consciousness sees the food coming". But the view I defend does not really legitimate such locutions. Those attributions run together the phenomenological and

metaphysical notions of "the subject". The sense of counterintuitiveness that comes from saying "the episode sees..." (etc.) stems from the fact that the episode is *not* the metaphysical subject.

When we make normal attributions of conscious mental states to a creature, we encode information about the location or individuation of the conscious episode (and this gets construed as "ownership"—it's Skipper's seeing), information about the representational content and modality or attitude the episode involves (food and seeing, respectively, in this case), and a sort of folk theory about the relational structure of consciousness. That folk theory puts whole organisms or agents, as it were, "behind" the conscious mental state, as the point of view or subject pole from which the experience emanates or, to use another metaphor famously attacked by Dennett (see 1991, ch. 5), as the spectator in the "Cartesian Theater". That folk theory is hopelessly homuncular, it seems to me. It offers no analysis of what a subject is and gives no hint as to what the real conditions of unity are for either organisms or subjects. (By contrast, self-representational and self-acquaintance theories try to preserve what is right about the Cartesian Theater intuition while avoiding a commitment to homuncularism.)

When we say "Skipper sees" we do not really mean that Skipper is, as it were, behind some sort of internal telescope looking out of his eyes or at some internal screen, though the first theory of seeing that some kids come up with is indeed the homuncular and regressive one according to which there is a little person in our heads looking at just such an internal screen. It seems that what is encoded in the folk theory implicit in our normal conscious mental state attributions is something like a homuncular projection of our third-person experience of other conscious organisms onto the organism's first-person experience. In other words, we see Skipper with his excited behavior and the food out there in front of him, some distance from his body; we then imagine that this relationship that we see "sideways on" (to borrow a phrase from John McDowell, see e.g., McDowell 1994, pp. 34-36) is, so to speak, rotated 90 degrees

<sup>2</sup> It is also possible that something other than consciousness could carry out most (but not all) of the functions consciousness performs in us and other organisms; this is also a debate for another time.

and moved inside Skipper's head—with Skipper as an irreducible agent assuming the position behind the eyepiece of his internal periscope.

That may be a bit too fanciful an exercise in the conceptual archaeology of folk-psychological mental state ascriptions, but the main point is just that our normal attributions of conscious mentality seem to run together generally accurate information about individuation or location (“ownership”), content, and attitude with a naïve and homuncular picture of subjective character. So, yes, it is true, I would say, that the organism is the subject of consciousness in the sense that conscious episodes (so far anyway) take place in organisms (actually in their brains) and causally depend upon organismic metabolic and homeostatic processes for their existence. In this sense, the organism is the *metaphysical* subject of consciousness, and this is properly reflected in our usual mental state attributions. However, I would emphatically (perhaps even hysterically) deny that the whole organism could be the *phenomenological* subject of consciousness. This is something also reflected in our usual attributions, but this is because the metaphysical and phenomenological subjects are simply conflated by folk psychology. The whole organism could not be the phenomenological subject for two reasons.

First, if one agrees with me, as Schlicht seems to, that subjective character and the subject-object polarity are phenomenally manifest even in pre-reflective consciousness, but one adds to this the claim that the phenomenological subject is the organism, then it would seem to follow that we are always aware of ourselves *qua* organism when we are consciously aware of anything—since, again, all consciousness by hypothesis has subjective character. Now, this could mean either that we represent ourselves *qua* organism or that we are acquainted with ourselves (and we are, in fact, organisms). Surely we do not, at the level of consciousness, represent ourselves *qua* organisms all the time, unless all one means by that is that consciousness has a biological function of some sort (that is, in, say, the teleofunctional sense, consciousness is “about” the organism and its ongoing relationship to the world). The latter is

undoubtedly true, but that is not a phenomenological characterization of subjective character; rather it is a thesis about the function of consciousness and its relation to organismal homeostasis. Of course, one could make an identity claim according to which subjective character (as experienced) really just is the suitably integrated representation of the organism, but this then would mean that one is embracing some form of P-theory (a theory according to which conscious representational states are distinct from non-conscious ones in part because they target some privileged object, e.g., the organism, a substantial self). If the claim is taken to mean that the organism is self-acquainted, then I might be willing to agree depending on the spin one puts on that claim.

One might just mean that there is some sub-process of the organism that is self-acquainted (that is self-manifesting or directly phenomenally self-representing, if one prefers). If that is all that is meant by the claim, then I can agree. Something like this is exactly the position I defend in the paper. After all, the central claim was just that consciousness is self-acquainted. And it was an unstated assumption of the paper that consciousness is a sub-process of the brain, and the brain a part of the organism. If, on the other hand, one means that the *whole* organism is directly acquainted with itself, this seems to me to be either an unexamined endorsement of commonsense, homuncular ways of making conscious mental state attributions (criticized above) or the claim that consciousness *necessarily* involves the entire organism.

The latter disjunct seems as false to me as the former. Yes, the prolonged existence of consciousness depends on the prolonged operation of the essential metabolic and homeostatic functions. And, indeed, almost certainly the metabolic functions that support synaptic transmission and some other basic neuronal processes are *sine qua non* for consciousness as it happens to be implemented in human and animal brains. But none of the specific means whereby our bodies support these functions have to be in place, it seems to me.

We can have artificial hearts and artificial respiration. In principle, we could offload all the

metabolic processes outside those internal to the nervous system to non-natural machines. And we could even, in principle, replace the natural generation of essential neurotransmitters with their artificial synthesis and, possibly, artificial projections for distributing them in the brain properly. Homeostasis could be maintained artificially and, in principle, without the relevant brainstem nuclei needing to do anything anymore (unless, of course, some of their activities just *happen*, for totally contingent evolutionary reasons, to be constitutively necessary for the occurrence of consciousness in brains like ours).

In short, it is certainly physically possible (though technologically beyond our current means) to keep a brain alive and operating in a “vat”! As long as we maintain those processes that are the neural correlates of (are identical to, in my view) consciousness, there would be consciousness in that brain in that vat. I am sorry, but all the evidence indicates that encephalism is true. And it seems to me to be a sort of externalist fetishism to think that consciousness literally extends beyond the brain (save by intentionality and causal interfacing). As Dan Lloyd says, we *already are* brains in vats! The cranium is the vat! (See [Lloyd 2004](#) pp. 244-245.)

Haven’t we learned from dreams, hallucinations, ALS, direct brain stimulation, and locked-in syndrome that consciousness does not need anything but the relevant brain functions to exist? Of course, the functioning brain depends upon a properly functioning body, but this does not mean that consciousness should be identified with those (other) bodily functions in some way. If we go this route, adding bodily correlates to neural correlates, when the latter causally and distally depend on the former, what is stop us from adding everything the body depends upon to our list of correlates (the gravitational constant, the bonding properties of molecules, the stability of the proton, etc.)?

True, at a certain level of analysis, it is hard to say precisely where the nervous system ends and the rest of the body begins. But then the same can be said for the body and the rest of the world (especially given that we routinely

appropriate, by breathing and eating, parts of that world). The boundaries are fuzzy at a certain scale, but this does not mean we should say there are no boundaries at all. Moreover, causal dependencies and interdependencies are myriad, but the causal relation is not the parthood relation—we cannot infer from “X causally depends on Y” that Y is a part of X. Human consciousness, as it is currently implemented, causally depends on respiration, but this does not mean that respiration is part of consciousness or that the physiological correlates of respiration are also correlates of consciousness.

If it is true that consciousness resides in the brain and depends on our specific homeostatic and metabolic processes only contingently (and I mean physically contingently, not merely logically contingently), then saying that consciousness requires an organism as a subject-pole starts to look a little fishier. This brings me to the second main reason why I would reject the claim that the whole organism is the phenomenological subject of consciousness.

What, after all, is an organism? It is clearly not just a collection of parts. We can agree with the Aristotelian tradition that it is a functional unity. We can agree that it is a system that, in virtue of its form or organization, is able to give rise to temporal successors (and I don’t necessarily mean offspring) that maintain that form or organization (at least for a while and at least within the range of conditions it evolved to live in). The matter always changes, but the form remains, from cradle to grave.

The organism takes matter from its environment to keep its processes going. And relative to its function of maintaining homeostasis (thereby giving rise to temporal successors that have the same organization it does) and to the scale at which those functions are, so to say, visible, we can truly say that the organism behaves like a goal-directed *whole* with interdependent parts and processes (and organs—the heart needs the lungs; the lungs need the heart; the kidneys need the stomach, etc.). This is all fine and dandy. But it is clear that organs are not to be identified with the whole organism. Skipper is not Skipper’s heart, though without it (or some suitable artificial replacement) little

Skippy would soon cease to be an organism at all and eventually become soil (or parts of other organisms).

More to point here, the brain is not the organism. Consciousness resides in the brain. We could, in principle, preserve consciousness simply by preserving the functioning brain. If this is true, then you do not need an organism for there to be consciousness, you just need a suitable *organ*—the brain.

I would never deny, of course, that we normally represent ourselves as having a body and relating to a world through that body. No doubt about it. Moreover, I believe it is metaphysically necessary that any consciousness be embodied in some substrate and that this embodiment configures consciousness in a way that is phenomenologically accessible to a certain extent. And, of course, we are organisms with a certain natural history. All of this “facticity” does indeed configure our consciousness to one degree or another. If all the organismal claim comes down to is that conscious beings are necessarily acquainted with their own contingent embodiment in a certain manner, then I will wholeheartedly agree. If it means that, contingently, consciousness evolved out of and is still connected to basic homeostatic functions (in some way), I will regard the claim as a not implausible hypothesis to be investigated.

This last claim is not, it seems to me, exactly what Damasio (see [Damasio 2010](#), ch. 2) and philosophers who follow him on this point, like [Charles Nussbaum \(2003\)](#) and apparently Schlicht himself, mean. They want to say something stronger. Like Francisco Varela (who possibly influenced Damasio on this point, see [Damasio 1999](#), p. 347; cf. [Varela 1979](#); [Maturana & Varela 1980](#)), they seem to want to connect consciousness essentially in the constitutive sense to the kinds of processes that are involved in homeostasis and the very emergence of an internal organism/non-organism distinction. It may well be that the subject/object distinction apparent in consciousness is, in evolutionary terms, some sort of extrapolation of this more basic distinction. It is clear, however, that, whatever the exact relation, the organism/non-organism distinction in, say, the immune sys-

tem, cannot just be identified with the subject/object distinction in consciousness. On Damasio’s view (as I understand it anyway) consciousness arises out of multiple, integrated layers of representation of the organism/non-organism distinction, where this representation itself has a certain regulatory function.

I certainly agree with [Schlicht \(this collection, p. 7\)](#) that, for Damasio, organismal and objectual representations have to be integrated in the right way for there to be something it is like for the organism, and I did not mean to suggest otherwise. This does not, however, make Damasio’s theory a non-representationalist theory (no more than the poise requirement makes Tye’s theory non-representationalist (see [Tye 1995](#), p. 138, [2000](#), p. 62)). As long as representation is considered a necessary condition for consciousness, the theory is representationalist, by my lights. And since the relevant representations, in Damasio’s theory, include, centrally, representations of the organism, it still qualifies as a P-theory in my sense—the organism is a privileged object. The representations that, when integrated, constitute consciousness, must include representations of the organism, according to the theory. Whatever else is represented in conscious mental states, on this sort of view, the organism certainly is. And the organism (ultimately in its guise as the “core self”) could thus serve as the phenomenological subject of consciousness.

I do understand how such a theory attempts to capture subjective character. In effect, it bundles it up into an object of a special sort that is always represented (one way or another) in any conscious mental state. For various reasons (e.g., the Fichte-Shoemaker Regress, see [Henrich 1982](#); [Frank 2004](#); [Frank 2007](#), pp. 157ff.; [Shoemaker 1968](#)), I do not think that such a theory can do the trick. Briefly, it is not enough simply to represent some object that you just happen to be. That is not sufficient to ground the manifest indexicality (the “I am this, here, now” aspect) of our conscious experience. Also, it is somewhat puzzling to require that consciousness representations have to have some specific type of content. Consciousness seems to be so flexible in this regard, that is

odd to think that there is such a “magic” object of representation. By contrast, I view subjective character (“reflexivity”) as a formal or structural feature of consciousness and not as a matter of representing some object or other (whether consciously or unconsciously)—including “the organism”. In fact, I believe such views, while on the right track relative to views that disregard subjective character, get the cart before the horse. *The representation of oneself as a self or an particular organism depends upon reflexivity, and not the other way around.*

For an organism (call it O) to benefit from representing an organism interacting with the world and with other organisms, there must be some way that it encodes that *it* is O (and not anything else). In effect, it needs a “you are here” (or rather “I am here”) dot on its map, a kind of “fixed-point” (see [Ismael 2007](#)). The mapper needs to know where *it* is on the map it has made. On pain of regress, it cannot derive a representation like “I must be here and not there, this organism on the map and not that one” without having some antecedent, unmediated self-reference or primitive self-knowledge (again, see [Shoemaker 1968](#)). Without this direct self-reference, the best we could hope for is a system that just happens to control itself by representing something that resembles itself in the relevant ways. Such a system might as well be controlling an exact duplicate in a duplicate room next door. We do not get manifest indexicality, self-location, or subjective character out of this. A system built up around reflexivity or direct self-reference (or primitive self-knowledge, if you prefer), would have all the control functions of a system that lacks it as well as these other features of subjectivity. Following a suggestion by Metzinger (personal communication), though with a certain modification, I would be happy to call this kind of reflexivity “prepersonal”. As such, it is the basis for one’s conscious representation of oneself as a person, organism, or anything else for that matter; but it is not essentially the representation of a person or an organism. Rather, it is the reflexivity of a process that happens to be housed in an organism (and in an organ within that organism) and that allows that organism to self-locate in a

multiplicity of spaces (physical, social, semantic, etc.).

I would add that that reflexivity could not itself be purely representational, as I argued in the paper. It very well could be, however, that reflexivity was first achieved in the evolution of organismic control systems and that these control systems have everything to do with the maintenance of homeostasis, though this is a contingency. *That* does not seem implausible to me at all. But that is a hypothesis about the evolutionary origin of self-acquaintance, not an account of what self-acquaintance is or how it is routinely generated and supported in the brain.

### 3 Unity, individuation, and integration

This brings me to Schlicht’s second and third claims. [Schlicht](#) is absolutely right, of course, to press me on the need for an account of the synchronic and diachronic unities of consciousness and for an account of the individuation of episodes and streams of consciousness ([this collection](#), p. 5). I bracketed such worries because I have not worked out any such accounts to my own satisfaction. I do, however, disagree with [Schlicht](#) on the idea that regarding the organism as the subject of consciousness can help with individuation ([this collection](#), p. 6). It is, in my view, not much easier to specify the metaphysical individuation conditions for an organism than it is to do so for an episode of consciousness. And it is problematic to assume that the brain has, so to speak, figured out what these conditions are for us. It is true that the brain must regulate a certain set of functions and processes in order to facilitate the maintenance of homeostasis; and I can even grant that doing so involves “representation” in a teleosemantic or functional-role sense. But this is orthogonal to any issues about the metaphysical individuation of organisms. While it may be easier to say what sort of processes an organism must involve (see above) and to roughly localize those processes than it is to say when one episode of consciousness begins and another ends, it is no easier to provide the *ultimate* metaphysical individuation conditions that ground the identities of the more basic physical processes that

both organisms and consciousness depend upon. At the end of the day we are always left turning our spades with the thought that there just exists a plurality of things in the cosmos—this proton (or bare particular or property or location) is not that one—end of story!

In the case of consciousness there is no *special* problem of metaphysical individuation, if what we are talking about is the fact that these episodes over here are in “my” head (in this brain), and those over there are in “your” head (in that brain). From a purely epistemic point of view, it does indeed seem to be the case that we individuate episodes of consciousness by reference to individuated organisms. But so what? This is a mere contingency. If, say, we saw conscious processes (or their correlates) first, and only with great effort could we locate the organism to which the processes were attached, we would individuate organisms by referring to the streams of consciousness that “own” those organisms. There is what we might call the “epistemic relativity of individuation”. This does not mean that there are no mind-independent facts about what ultimately individuates things. It just means that, since we have no access to what the ultimate individuators are, no particular way we individuate something should be regarded as privileged. We are guided by practical and interest-relative considerations. We might as well talk about the acorns’ squirrel rather than the squirrel’s acorns, but squirrels are more entertaining to us.

In any case, for any physical process, once you drink the metaphysical individuation Kool-Aid, you won’t come back to normal. At some point you’ll just find yourself saying “this is not that”. And anything you scratch (from universes, to stars and planets, to organisms, to molecules and particles) will fall apart in this connection. I believe there are real unities in nature and that conscious mental states are such real unities (it follows that I think certain brain processes are too), but from the epistemic and conceptual point of view Nagarjuna and the Madhyamikas seem to be right—we cannot pinpoint the basic individuators anywhere, they just seem to dissolve upon analysis one way or another (see e.g., [Westerhoff 2009](#)). I believe

such individuators exist but that they are inaccessible to us. And, as I argued in the paper, it is a serious confusion to think that in being self-acquainted you *ipso facto* have access to what it is that ultimately individuates you. You are aware of the unity and individuality of your episodes of consciousness, but those features, in turn, could depend on other unities and individuation conditions that you have no access to (cf. [Williford 2011](#), pp. 202-203).

I am as happy as the next bloke to claim that conscious mental episodes arise and eventually give way to the next conscious mental episodes. Perhaps they overlap somehow to form a stream. Or perhaps they are punctate and we could empirically determine their temporal boundaries; I do not know. It is, however, clear that my conscious episode of reading H.P. Lovecraft for nostalgia’s sake before bed is not the conscious episode of eating yogurt for breakfast that I began the day with. But is it the same *organism* that eats in the morning and reads in the evening? It is indeed, given our normal (possibly partly pragmatic) individuation criteria for organisms. One would not have to be Heraclitus, however, to notice that the being that started the day is *quite different* from the one that unwisely decided to read Lovecraft before bed. And at a certain very fine-grained level of analysis, it is a *radically* different being.

We say things like “I ate yogurt this morning” and “I read Lovecraft at the age of 14” and “I am reading Lovecraft right before bed tonight”. We take this “I” to refer to the same organism and to the same “autobiographical self” to use Damasio’s term or same “ego” in Sartre’s sense of the word. But as [Sartre](#) pointed out ([2004](#), pp. 7-9), no such temporally extended and dubitable entity could be entirely present in consciousness (so as to serve as its subjective character). Instead we have only a set of processes that remain more or less constant (and of course a causal-historical chain that is not broken). But the whole causal-historical chain does not exist at the present moment. It cannot be packed into a single conscious episode (though it could, of course, be represented in one). Nor can it, as a real pole of identity, exist

throughout all conscious episodes. There is no transcendental ego. Nor is there any transcendental organism. An appeal to the organism does not, just by itself, help us with the diachronic unity problem or the individuation problem. And though the brain may somehow unconsciously always “represent” us as organisms (in perhaps the teleosemantic sense of “represent”), it is evident that we are not always conscious of ourselves as organisms (whatever exactly that is supposed to mean). Yet subjective character is there whenever consciousness is.

Thus, I do not see how the organismal theory helps with either the individuation problem for conscious episodes and streams or the related diachronic unity problem. But it is also not obvious to me how the organismal theory could help us with the synchronic unity issue either—the issue of how different phenomenal and representational contents get integrated into whole, unified conscious mental states or episodes. I fully agree with Schlicht that a brain process (e.g., an “unconscious perception” of something) can be integrated into consciousness, making a new whole, and then possibly slip out again. And I too like Edelman’s and Tononi’s “Dynamic Core” idea (see [Edelman & Tononi 2000](#), Part IV) as a way of conceptualizing this integration and dis-integration. And I would emphatically reject the “micro-consciousness” idea of Zeki (see [Zeki 2007](#)). It does not seem to help to imagine many consciousnesses in the brain that somehow meld together to make a bigger one. (At least I hope it is not like that!)

In connection with this, I, like most people, believe that normally there is only one stream of consciousness existing in a given brain (with split-brain cases perhaps being an exception). I prefer the idea that consciousness is a type of process that has certain generic, essential structural features (temporality, subjective character, phenomenal character, representational character) and certain variable features (this comes down to variability of phenomenal and representational characters at different times). Due to some constantly fluctuating integration process, the phenomenal and representational characters of consciousness are al-

ways in flux, while temporality and subjective character remain invariant. Moreover, phenomenal and representational characters are such that they can, so to speak, expand and contract.

I can be hearing Bach’s *Musikalisches Opfer* while staring at a Jackson Pollock painting. I can then close my eyes so that only the beauty remains in my consciousness. If I open them again, then the visual horror will be reintegrated into it. When I closed my eyes there was “contraction”; when I opened them again, “expansion” back to the “size” the experience was before I closed them. There must indeed be something that accounts for this integration process and the resulting synchronic, differentiated unity of consciousness.

I completely agree with Schlicht that we need a theory that allows us to understand how something enters consciousness and how it gets integrated into a whole with other things that have already entered consciousness, but I do not know what that theory. Moreover, I do not know if it is possible to have a conscious experience of but one sensory quality in one modality (say, the auditory consciousness of a pure C tone) without any other thoughts, imaginings, perceptions, or anything else. I would say, though, that if one could, that episode of consciousness would still have subjective character (and temporality).

Though I agree that we all need an integration story, it is quite unclear to me that that story alone will give us a story about subjective character, unless, like [Van Gulick](#) (see e.g., [2004](#); cf. [Metzinger 1995](#)), one thinks that subjective character as a kind of reflexivity emerges out of integration. That may be, though I have never understood how, exactly, that is supposed to happen on Van Gulick’s view (though I do have some sense of what he means). It is not clear to me how this is supposed to happen on [Schlicht’s](#) view either (see [this collection](#), p. 11). But I would be quite pleased if an account like this could be made to work, since deriving reflexivity from integration would, it seems to me, be a theoretical advance.

In any case, for me, subjective character as reflexivity is a phenomenological given. It is

part of the data set from which I begin. It is my “Phenomenological Muse”. I could be wrong about its importance, of course, but until I am shown that, I will explore the model space that is appropriate to that intuition and leave it to empirical testing to determine whether or not the Muse was lying to me. (I will add, in a purely psychologistic vein, that many philosophers are allergic to reflexivity for purely irrational reasons. They just find it odd or too complicated or too puzzling. So they see it as an advantage if they can offer an account that gets around the need for it. For me this is like taking Marlon Brando out of *Apocalypse Now* or preferring decaf coffee to the real deal.)

As I see it, subjective character is like a universal or form. It is just the “reflexive” structure of consciousness. It is not to be reified into an entity (or refried like a bean, for that matter). If we think of it as an entity, we will find ourselves puzzling over questions about momentary subjects and how all these different subjects relate to each other over time and at a time. This is a confusion in my view. Yes, our normal use of language and the naïve ontology it encodes demand entities and substances to correspond to our nouns! But consciousness is not an entity or substance. It is a process; it is more like a wave than the medium the wave requires. It has a certain structure and a certain dynamical profile. Subjective character is, like temporality, an ever-replicated form that, in my view, is necessary for all consciousness. There is no subject *entity* strictly speaking. When there is an episode of looking back down the tunnel of previous conscious episodes that are connected in the normal way to that very episode of conscious looking, individuated subjective character is always seen. Just in terms of subjective character, all the episodes are qualitatively identical. This helps reinforce the illusion of a stable, continuous subject entity.<sup>3</sup> Again, there is no such entity. There is just a common form or structure living in the many different tokens. After Parfit (1984) and the Buddhists, we might say that this at once helps dissolve the thing we

once thought so substantial and important and draws us closer to other tokens, no matter what stream they happen to be in.

Finally, it seems to me that Schlicht ([this collection](#), p. 7) must take “creature-consciousness” to be more fundamental than “state-consciousness” (or “episode-consciousness”), whereas I would adhere to the usual idea that phenomenally conscious creatures are just those that host episodes (or states) of consciousness. I don’t see how reversing this order helps.

## 4 Conclusion

To recapitulate: (1) I do not see what is gained, either in relation to the individuation problem or the unity and integration problems, by regarding the organism as the phenomenological subject of consciousness. (2) I understand how P-theories attempt to do this by making the organism part of the representational content of every episode of consciousness, but I do not find those theories plausible or helpful, even if we stress the integration aspect of the theories (which does not make them cease to be P-theories). (3) I was less clear on how Schlicht thinks that an integration theory could account for subjective character if it deviates from the Damasio-style theory or from Van Gulick’s HOGS model, which latter I have also always found a little hard to understand, though I am in sympathy with it. (4) I would emphatically deny the existence of Zeki-style micro-consciousnesses; rather, I believe there is (normally) only one stream of consciousness per brain—and that stream can “expand and contract” as more or less gets integrated into it. (5) We do need an account of how unconscious processes get integrated into consciousness and of both diachronic and synchronic unity; but I am not prepared to offer such an account at present. (6) Regardless of how such an account goes, I take reflexivity (self-acquaintance) to be an essential structural feature of all consciousness; and I take it to be a phenomenological datum. All streams of consciousness are immediately aware of themselves, and that is the foundation of all other forms of self-representation, autobiographical cognition, and so on. (7) This reflexivity is subjective

<sup>3</sup> See Hofstadter 2007, ch. 7, “The Epi Phenomenon”, for a nice analogy in this connection: the illusion of a marble in the center of a box of envelopes arises just from the stacking of the envelopes (with their repeated structure).

character (for-me-ness), but it is a mistake to turn this structural feature into a kind of entity or homunculus. Thus in saying that the episode is the phenomenological subject, I am offering a non-homuncular account of the subject of consciousness. This ought to reduce a little bit of the weirdness of my claim that the episode is the phenomenological subject. (8) In other senses of “subject”, it is undoubtedly correct to say that the subject of consciousness is the organism, since it is (so far) organisms that have consciousness. However, strictly speaking, consciousness is a sub-process of the organism and lives in one of its organs—the brain. (9) Since we could, in principle, have conscious, functioning brains without the rest of the organism, it seems to follow that the organism is not the phenomenological subject—unless one adopts a P-theory according to which the privileged object we represent is just the organism we happen to be; but see (2) above.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Thomas Metzinger and Jennifer Windt and the MIND team, once again, for organizing this volume. Thomas and Jennifer also gave me very valuable feedback on a draft of this reply—thank you both for that! I would also like to thank Tobias Schlicht for writing such a gracious, challenging, and stimulating commentary. I hope he knows that I honestly do not think he is irrationally allergic to reflexivity or that he embraces a fetishistic externalism! Cheers, Tobias!

## References

- Brentano, F. (1995). *Psychology from an empirical standpoint* (trans. A.C. Rancurello, D.B. Terrell and L.L. McAlister). London, UK: Routledge.
- Damasio, A. R. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. New York, NY: Harcourt.
- (2010). *Self comes to mind*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Dennett, D. C. (1991). *Consciousness explained*. Boston, MA: Little.
- Edelman, G. M. & Tononi, G. (2000). *A universe of consciousness: How matter becomes imagination*. New York, NY: Basic books.
- Frank, M. (2004). Fragments of a history of the theory of self-consciousness from Kant to Kierkegaard. *Critical Horizons*, 5 (1), 53-136.
- (2007). Non-objectal subjectivity. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 14 (5-6), 152-173.
- Henrich, D. (1982). Fichte’s original insight. In D. Christensen (Ed.) *Contemporary German Philosophy, Vol. 1* (pp. 15-53). University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Hofstadter, D. R. (2007). *I am a strange loop*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Ismael, J. (2007). *The situated self*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Lloyd, D. E. (2004). *Radiant cool: A novel theory of consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Maturana, H. R. & Varela, F. J. (1980). *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living*. Berlin, GER: Springer.
- McDowell, J. (1994). *Mind and world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Metzinger, T. (1995). Faster than thought: Holism, homogeneity, and temporal coding. In T. Metzinger (Ed.) *Conscious experience* (pp. 425-461). Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic.
- Nussbaum, C. (2003). Another look at functionalism and the emotions. *Brain and Mind*, 4 (3), 353-383.  
[10.1023/B:BRAM.0000005469.62248.00](https://doi.org/10.1023/B:BRAM.0000005469.62248.00)
- Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and persons*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Sartre, J. P. (2004). *The transcendence of the ego: A sketch for a phenomenological description* (trans. Brown, A.). London, UK: Routledge.
- Schlicht, T. (2015). Explaining subjective character: Representation, reflexivity, or integration? In T. Metzinger & J. M. Windt (Eds.) *Open MIND*. Frankfurt a. M., GER: MIND Group.

- Shoemaker, S. (1968). Self-reference and self-awareness. *Journal of Philosophy*, 65 (19), 555-567.
- Tye, M. (1995). *Ten problems of consciousness: A representational theory of the phenomenal mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- (2000). *Consciousness, color, and content*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Van Gulick, R. (2004). Higher-order global states (HOGS) An alternative higher-order model. In R. Genaro (Ed.) *Higher-order theories of consciousness* (pp. 67-92). Amsterdam, NL: John Benjamins.
- Varela, F. J. (1979). *Principles of biological autonomy*. New York, NY: North Holland.
- Westerhoff, J. (2009). *Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka: A philosophical introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Williford, K. (2011). Pre-reflective self-consciousness and the autobiographical ego. In J. Webber (Ed.) *Reading Sartre* (pp. 195-210). London, UK: Routledge.
- Zeki, S. (2007). A theory of micro-consciousness. In M. Velmans & S. Schneider (Eds.) *The Blackwell companion to consciousness* (pp. 580-588). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.