The Conscious Act of Looking at a Painting

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Summary

This paper considers what happens during the conscious act of looking at a painting. First, two widely held views about the nature of consciousness are introduced: that it's unified and that it's essentially rational. I then describe in some detail my experience of looking at a Monet painting, *Rouen Cathedral* (1892-4), and note that what I experience does not seem consistent with either of these views. In fact what I experience is a multiplicity of conflicting beliefs and thoughts, which are nevertheless co-existent. I conclude that 'normal waking, rational consciousness', as described by William James, may be better regarded as multiplicitous and often irrational, although this does not seem to pose any problem for the act of looking itself. Indeed it seems to be the very mark of lived, conscious experience.

“When looking at a picture, one should say that makes me think of … more associations it can open up the better.”¹

Pablo Picasso, quoted in Cowling, 2006, p. 264

Introduction

This paper is about what happens when we consciously look at paintings, or to be more accurate what I observe happening in my own consciousness when looking at a particular painting.² I will suggest, but not assert, that what occurs in my own consciousness bears some relation to what occurs in the conscious minds of others when confronted with a similar object.

The word 'looking' is of course inadequate to account for what is going on when we attend to a work of art, for we must also be thinking, remembering, reflecting, imagining, and doing all these with an active, alert state of mind. This is not to deny we can look at paintings absent-mindedly, or that there are many unconscious processes involved in underpinning a train of conscious awareness. But I will assume that when we engage with a painting we do so as sentient observers employing what William James termed our 'normal consciousness' (James, 2004, p. 335).

This is not a paper about a specifically aesthetic response to a work of art, but uses a work of art as a specific case of looking which leads to the particular state of mind I try here to describe. I will try to show that thinking about what happens when looking

¹ This is an extract from a rapidly taken note by the collector and critic Roland Penrose when in conversation with Picasso; hence the grammatical inconsistency.

² Within ‘consciousness’ I include to all the various mental events — thoughts, memories, sensations, beliefs, etc. — of which I am aware.
at a painting may reveal something about the nature of conscious experience itself. But at the outset it is necessary to make two points about what consciousness is, or at least how it is currently understood.

**Consciousness as a unified state**

Conscious experience is widely regarded as a singular phenomenon in which a number of discrete mental processes — memory, perception, cognition, imagination, emotion, sensation — converge or bind together into a unified state. As one advocate of this view puts it:

> Our introspective experience is one of unity, of monolithic coherence. This unity characterizes consciousness and awareness, attention, perception and action, our decisions and our will, our personality and self and, to a large extent, our value judgments. This unity prevails in spite of the diversity of aspects, influences, perceptions, impulses, memories, processes, and agents that we find as components of our mind, or, from a different perspective, in spite of the tremendous mass of building elements in our brain — areas, nuclei, nerves, neurons, fibres, synapses, membranes, and molecules. Creating the mind's unity out of the brain's diversity, the problem of nervous integration, is now ... an issue of a scientific, technical nature.

von der Malsburg, 1997, p. 193

This apparent unity relates to, and is sometimes collapsed into, the ‘binding problem’ — the question of how spatially distributed and asynchronous neurobiological events (such as colour, shape and motion perception) are bound together to create seemingly unified perceptual objects (for a review see Roskies, 1999). Researchers like Francis Crick and Christof Koch have sought biological mechanisms to account for the fact that: “Our experience of perceptual unity thus suggests that the brain in some way binds together, in a mutually coherent way, all those neurons actively responding to different aspects of a perceived object.” (Crick and Koch, 1990). And it is by such mechanisms that the totality of our phenomenal experience is thought to be held together as one.³

**Consciousness as a rational phenomenon**

The second issue concerns the extent to which consciousness can be regarded as an essentially rational phenomenon. William James, in an oft-quoted passage, talked of our “normal waking, rational consciousness” (my emphasis) in contrast to other “entirely different” forms consciousness of a mystical or religious kind (James, 2004, p. 335). Few, I think, would fundamentally dissent from James' broad distinction between the two forms, though we might point to overlaps and nuances. Normal consciousness of the kind we are concerned with here would seem to be characterised by a capacity for reasoned and logical thought, responsible behaviour, and conceptual consistency. Ned Block, talking about the extraordinary capacity so-called ‘blindsight’ patients have for correctly guessing the contents of a stimulus presented to them in a part of the visual field in which they are unable to see, defines

³ There is a useful discussion on the various questions surrounding ‘The Unity of Consciousness’ in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on that topic. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-unity/
the “access-consciousness” they seem to lack in this regard as “...the ability to deploy information in reasoning and rational control of action.” (Block, 1995).

In addition, there is consensus among scientists studying consciousness that their shared inquiry into should itself proceed along rational lines. In his opening address to the 10th Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness conference in 2006, executive board member Patrick Wilken defined the association as “a group of people gathered together for the purpose of promoting a rational discourse — grounded in empirical facts, with agreed upon rules of evidence — about consciousness.” (Wilken 2006. My emphasis)

It seems to follow that the object we study in a rational way, normal consciousness, should in itself be amenable to rational analysis and behave according to rational laws; which is to say that facts about consciousness should not be contradictory.  

The purpose of this paper is not to examine these claims in detail but to propose that if I think about what happens when I look at a painting — about the relationship between my conscious mind and the object in the world — I actually find little to support either the intuition that my normal conscious experience is unitary or that it is necessarily rational in nature, i.e. free from contradiction.

Looking at a painting

The painting I wish to take as an example is one of a series of some thirty studies that Claude Monet (1840-1926) made of Rouen Cathedral in the early 1890s. They are made at different times of the day and year and capture the shifts in weather conditions and illumination. The particular example I am referring to was painted between 1892 and 1894 and is now housed in the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. I know the painting well since I work near the museum and visit frequently. It’s important to state this because what follows is based on the experience of looking at the painting itself, not a reproduction. Valuable as they can be as visual references or memory aids, no reproduction can substitute for the physical qualities inherent in the original artwork.

It may not be apparent from the reproduction here (Figure 1) or the image online at the National Museum of Wales website, that the painting is made of heavily textured oil paint of dry consistency, seemingly mixed with fibres and grit, applied in dabs and drags with a range of blues, pinks, greys, oranges and purples. The total effect is of a luminous surface within which one can discern the Gothic form of the cathedral façade, where the apparent details in the stonework are conjured up in a mesh of matted pigment.

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4 I am applying here as a criterion of rationality a founding principle of Western logic, namely Aristotle’s Principle of Non-Contradiction: “that the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect”, such that “it is impossible for any one to believe the same thing to be and not to be.” (Metaphysics IV, 3)

5 The painting is reproduced in colour at http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/art/online/
In what follows I will discuss five examples of the various mental events (thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, etc.) I become aware of during the act of looking at the painting. I ask that before judging the consequent argument the reader put themselves in a similar position to mine, and consider whether or not, looking at an original painting of comparable representational content, they experience something similar.

1. The cathedral is there and not there

Few would have a problem recognising an ecclesiastical building in Monet’s painting, even if they didn’t know its exact identity. If asked “What is that a painting of?” the average, unwary, viewer should reply “A cathedral”, or some such. Yet that same viewer would probably need little persuasion to accept that after all it is not a cathedral but an artfully arranged mass of pigmented plant oil held together by a fabric and wooden support. Putting aside for a moment the philosophical problems involved, we have little problem in accepting that both these contradictory statements are true: ‘That is a cathedral’ and ‘That is not a cathedral’. Indeed the psychologist Richard Gregory regards images as occupying a “double reality” in which “…they are seen both as themselves and as some other thing, entirely different from the paper or
canvas of the picture." He concludes: “Pictures are paradoxes...Pictures are impossible" (Gregory, 1970, p. 32)

One philosopher who has recently proposed a solution to this perplexing aspect of representation is Alan Paskow, whose *Paradoxes of Art* (Paskow, 2004) attempts to resolve why it is we care about fictional characters. I can only précis the argument here, and would urge further consultation of the book for a full exposition, but his basic case is that when we read a novel or watch a film we believe in the characters with whom we empathise *at the same time* as we believe they don’t exist. Previous attempts to resolve this so-called ‘Paradox of Fiction’ have largely involved trying to undermine one more of the premises, but Paskow’s approach is to posit a kind a split personality, or what he terms “dual vision” (ibid, p.63), in the mind of the audience where two entirely contradictory beliefs co-exist in the same experience. In the case of the Monet, we can believe it is a cathedral and at the same time recognise it is not because, according to Paskow, the supposed distinction between the real object and its representation is much less clear than the majority of preceding western philosophers would have us believe (preceding that is Heidegger, on a reading of whom he bases much of his argument).

The reason we can empathise with Cordelia in *King Lear* or believe in the veridicality of Monet’s cathedral is because we are inclined to treat a representation as if it were the thing it represents. But we are saved from confusing the representation and the thing it represents by an additional state of consciousness (what Paskow calls ‘consciousness2’) which remains aware of the illusory nature of the representation without negating our belief in it. Paskow claims his proposal for a dual vision, in which conflicting beliefs can be held by distinct aspects of the same mind, avoids the charge the he is merely reasserting the contradiction, or paradox. Whether one would take issue with him on this or not, Paskow’s mounts a coherent philosophical argument to the effect that we can entertain two conflicting beliefs at once, as seems clear to me what happens when I look at the Monet’s cathedral of paint. What I see in front of me is an artwork, i.e. an object composed of wood, canvas, oil and pigment, and a cathedral, an object I know to be composed of stone, glass, metal, etc.

2. The paint is both paint and a cathedral

I was recently struck by a strange sensation when looking at a stone carving in the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. The statue of Charles Darwin, finely carved in Caen stone by H. R. Hope Pinker and located in the court of the museum, includes a convincingly fluent rendering of a Victorian frock coat, and it was while studying its flowing folds that the strangeness came over me. I realized that I was looking both at a lump of stone and a coat, without one percept negating the other. It wasn’t as if what I saw oscillated, as in a Necker cube, between a coat and a lump of stone. Nor were those two states of recognition collapsed into one, such that I saw

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6 René Magritte’s notorious surrealist painting, *The Treachery of Images* (1928), which features a picture of a pipe below which sits the caption ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’, is perhaps one of the most elegant reminders of this representational dilemma in which an object both is and is not what it purports to be.
some kind of undifferentiated ‘stone-coat’, neither coat or stone. I attributed the feeling of strangeness to the realization that I was experiencing a kind of ‘dualistic perception’ accompanied by a sense of vibratory intensity much as occurs when opposing colours, like red and green, are juxtaposed in the same visual field.

In *Rouen Cathedral* Monet has gone to some trouble to make conspicuous the material attributes of the paint rather than trying to conceal them, as those with a more orthodox approach to the craft had previously done. Working against the prevailing fashion in fin de siècle France, where artists like William Bouguereau were acclaimed for their near-invisible brushstrokes, Monet has made the paint thick, dense, clotted and knobbled, and if you get close enough you get the faintest whiff of linseed as the oil continues to dry some 100 years after its application. Yet at the same time I am continually aware of the presence of the cathedral; even the tiny clumps of matter seem on very close inspection to congeal into ornamentation on the Gothic masonry. Although I see the paint as paint and I see the paint as a cathedral, these two distinct acts of seeing nevertheless co-exist, much as stone and coat did in the statue of Darwin. The situation could be summarized, almost paradoxically in the following way: *what I am aware of seeing is a cathedral that is not just a cathedral made of paint that is not just paint*.

3. Sameness and difference, wholes and parts

*Rouen Cathedral* is a highly complex pictorial construction, the marks on its surface are restless, intricate and chaotic. Tiny strands of paint are woven into a shimmering fabric, within which one can’t say precisely where any depicted object begins or ends. Some of the forms identifiable at a distance start to evaporate when viewed closely, and in places vanish almost completely. No two areas of the painting are identical, yet even though I can attend to the tiniest flecks of differentiated colour I remain continually aware of larger patterns and forms — the expanse of cerulean-turquoise sky, the target-like ‘clock’ just below dead centre, the shadowy luminosity of the recesses above the doors; all these grosser masses made up of smaller components, each contributing to the overall composition of the canvas.

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7 The distinction between the matter and form of an artwork is an ancient one, and is expressed by Ovid: *materiam superabat opus*, *(Metamorphoses*, II.5) variously translated as ‘the work of art was finer than the material’.

8 Oil-paint, i.e. chemical pigment bound in an oil such as linseed or poppy, never ‘dries’ in the way water-based paint does. It gradually oxidises over time as it reacts with the air around it forming a compound called linoxin, a process that depending on the composition and thickness of the paint can continue for many years after the paint is applied. Hence the ‘gallery smell’ one can get even in a room full of Old Masters.

9 The artist and writer Julian Bell corroborates this strange sense of duality generated by artworks in his book *What is Painting?* when he distinguishes the representational mark made by the artist from the incidental mark made a tyre skid. With the artist’s mark: “We see it and we see past it, or into it; it is what it is and a reminder of something else besides. It is when we see something in that double, ambivalent manner that we call it a mark” *(Bell. 1999, p. 26, his emphasis)*
It strikes me that what I see as I look over this painting, or in fact in almost any natural scene, is constructed through the interplay between distinct qualitative states: sameness and difference, wholeness and fragmentation. By any standards these pairs are comprised of polar opposites; one cannot also be the other and they ought to be easy to distinguish. Yet if I take any part of the painting and try to say whether it constitutes an area of sameness or difference, a whole or fragment, I find the task impossible, at least in any absolute sense. For example, I can judge that the area of blue sky constitutes a whole (albeit one made up of numerous discrete clumps) but cannot frame this within my visual field without also seeing it as a fragment of the larger image, being bounded by the top of the roof and the columns on either side. In fact any area one cares to chose within the picture would seem to have a formal quality that could be characterized alternately, and simultaneously, as a part or a whole — a similarity or a difference.

It also occurs to me that the painting I see as a singular pictorial field is in fact experienced as the superimposition of momentary fixations, each being the immediate focus of my central vision, supplemented my peripheral vision, and (as I understand from the scientific literature, e.g. Livingstone, 2002; Martinez-Conde et al, 2005) captured by virtue of countless saccades and micro-saccades that send my eyeball shuddering over the surface of the work many times a second. In sum: what I see, or what I become aware that I see, is a painting both as a whole and in parts at the same time, in that every whole it itself a part and every part itself a whole.

4. Where the painting is

The painting is assuredly beyond the physical proximity of my skull, yet what I actually ‘see’ is inside my head. For what I see is not the painting ‘in itself’ but an image of the object formed by my perceptual apparatus, an apparatus we know is largely (if not exclusively) located in the visual regions of the brain. Where precisely is the painting I see — outside or inside my head? Or are there actually two paintings, the perceived one inside my head and the real one outside? One could make the case (and I would support it) that the perceived image of the painting and the painting in itself are part of the same continuous entity, which may resolve one set of problems. But this leaves us having to accept the somewhat bizarre conclusion that the painting inhabits a space both outside and inside my head at the same time.

Again, my purpose here is not to delve deeply into these arguments. I raise them only to make the point that as I look at Monet’s Cathedral I am aware that there is an

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10 An exception to this possibly being the Ganzfeld, an undifferentiated colour field into which subjects are immersed during parapsychology experiments.
11 For an authoritative, although not uncontested, account of the neurological basis of visual perception and its relation to art see Semir Zeki’s Inner Vision (1999), which also offers some speculations on the state of Monet’s brain when painting the Cathedral series.
12 For an more detailed discussion of the problem of locating the image in relation to the head, although using as an example the cinema screen rather than painting, see Pepperell (2006).
unsetting conflict between what is self-evident (the painting appears out there in front of me) and what the scientific data tells me (this appearance is a mirage generated by cellular activity taking place behind my eyes). Both beliefs seem valid, both have the force of truth, but one contradicts the other.

(A simpler way of expressing a similar idea, and perhaps one more likely to occur to an observer unfamiliar with current debates in the science of perception, is to say: The painting appears to be separate from me and yet also part of me. The reasoning is pretty straightforward, although potentially paradoxical: I take what I see in front of me to be an object out there in the world quite distinct from myself. At the same time this object constitutes the overwhelming portion of my experience of the world. To the extent that I equate myself with my experience of the world the object is part of me.)

5. The painting is flat and 3-Dimensional

Putting aside for one moment the deeply textured surface employed by Monet, we could consider the image to be flat, and this is certainly how it will appear in any reproduction available to the reader. It seems a trivial point, but although I am perfectly aware of this ‘flatness’ I am also convinced of the perspectival recession in the image and the deep space occupied by the cathedral. It is certainly not an image of a ‘flat’ cathedral, even though what I am seeing is clearly flat. Moreover, when looking at a photograph I have taken myself of the painting (see Figure 2) I am vividly aware of both the undulations in the paint itself and the spatial depth of the depicted cathedral — a double illusion of depth — even though the photograph is to me a 2-dimensional array of pixels.

13 There is an interesting discussion of the depth perception implicit in Monet’s Cathedral series in Livingstone (2002).
What happens when I look at this painting

I have presented these five examples as compactly as possible while acknowledging that in doing so I have opened up many serious philosophical problems that would need far greater space than is available in this paper to shut down. However, my purpose here has been simply to record some of the mental facts of which I become aware when looking at this painting, to do this as honestly and accurately as I can and to the minimum extent necessary in order to substantiate the following proposition:

*The conscious experience associated with looking at this painting is neither unitary nor necessarily rational, but composed of multiple and often contradictory thoughts and beliefs in a way that seems incompatible with the two widely-accepted views of consciousness presented at the outset.*

What is remarkable is that I am able to consciously entertain these co-existent and conflicting thought and beliefs with no unusual sense of disruption, disorientation or confusion. One might think that holding so many diverse and incompatible thoughts at once might be a sign of impending insanity, or at least a very unstable mind. But although I am investing the painting with more attention than I might invest in a less
revered object I am not experiencing any mental imbalance (of which I am aware),
nor some non-waking, extraordinary, “mystic” consciousness of the kind referred to
by James. As far as I am concerned, looking at a painting is a normal — if somewhat
special — act of conscious awareness by no means unconnected with the more
pedestrian states of mind that precede and succeed it.14

Some objections

I don’t doubt that a critic seeking to uphold the philosophic and scientific views of
consciousness presented at the outset could mount a reasoned case to the effect
that what I perceive as multiple and contradictory aspects of my conscious
experience are really unified and entirely self-consistent. Such a case, however,
would need to demonstrate that I am mistaken in my own mind about what happens
when I look at this painting, even though I have striven to carefully consider that
experience and give as clear and honest an account as I can. I am certainly willing to
countenance that my beliefs are mistaken, and that I am not experiencing what I
think I am experiencing, but I would need some clear evidence and a persuasive
argument to change my mind.

One line of criticism may be to object that von der Malsburg’s position cited above
doesn’t deny we can entertain multiple distinct thoughts, memories, ideas and maybe
even quite irrational beliefs, but that these still ultimately cohere into the overall
unified state of phenomenal experience we term ‘consciousness’. As I hope I’ve
made clear, I don’t want to categorically deny this view, but rather temper it with two
notes of caution. First, we obviously and routinely give diverse events a collective
name (a mass of individual people is called a ‘crowd’) but we should not then assume
internal connections and relationships between them that may not exist (and then
spend a lot of time looking for them). To give a simple example: just because there
happen to be a number of painters in a room does not mean there’s a convention o
artists going on. And just because we collectively describe the diverse mental
activities of which we are aware by the term ‘consciousness’ does not mean that
these events are therefore unified or self-consistent.

A more difficult problem lies in the subjectivity and ambiguity that creeps into any
attempt to determine the qualities of ‘unity’ and ‘multiplicity’. Like the parts and
wholes mentioned above, these are relative rather than absolute qualities that (to
complicate matters) are defined by the exact same subjective experience we are
trying to attribute them to. There is an unavoidable self-referentiality in play when the
entity that undertakes the investigation — the conscious mind — is the object of its
own investigation, and so deciding whether the entity that attributes qualities of unity
and multiplicity is itself unified or multiplicitous becomes a rather perplexing if not
impossible question.

14 One could make the argument (although full exposition would require another
paper) that part of the ‘specialness’ inherent in aesthetic experience is that it goes
someway to bridging the ordinary and mystical aspects of consciousness (if we
accept James’ distinction), in that works of art are grounded in the everyday, material
contingencies of reality, with all its conflicting multiplicity, yet also offer the promise of
some more transcendentental, unified state of mind.
On top of this, the concept of unity is prone to ambiguity: many of the dictionary definitions I consult refer to a state of undifferentiated, unvarying, undivided and uniform oneness (see for example the multiple entries in Dictionary.com\(^\text{15}\)), yet elsewhere it is defined as “forming a whole from separate parts” (Collins, 1992), which may be more in line with von der Malsburg’s description, but only contradicts the previously given definitions (if it is undifferentiated it cannot be composed of separate parts), and leads us straight into the semantic thickets. I want to put these issues in abeyance because such vast topics cannot be properly dealt with here. I will only say that although a “unity of monolithic coherence” (to use von der Malsburg’s phrase) may characterize some holistic, transcendental states of consciousness described by mystics (see below) it is certainly not a fair description of the rather jumbled, fragmentary and logically incoherent state of my mind when looking at the *Cathedral*.

**Consciousness neither unified nor rational**

I have proposed that what happens when I look at Monet’s painting does not seem to accord with the widely held views that my normal conscious awareness is both unified and rational. Insofar as I can observe it, my actual experience is not singular, unified or monolithic but multiple, fragmented and polymorphous. I agree with Picasso when he says the best art opens up the most associations, and these associations are, I would say from my own point of view, entertained not only serially but also in parallel. All the ideas generated through the contemplation of a work of art (such as, and in addition to those already described, warm French sunlight, the sounds of footfalls and attendants’ walkie-talkies in the gallery, appreciation of the feat of single-minded creativity required to complete the *Cathedral* series, and many more) appear to co-exist and overlap during the act of contemplation without merging or obliterating each other.

Nor does my real experience of looking at the painting consist in purely rational, logical or coherent beliefs, but in often irrational, contradictory and incoherent ones: it is an artwork and a cathedral; it is paint that is not just paint; it is a whole and particular; it is separate from me and part of me; it appears as both flat and 3-dimensional. William James goes on from the passage cited above to describe the “entirely different” kinds of consciousness he had experienced by intoxicating himself with nitrous oxide:

Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but one of the species, the nobler and better one, is itself the genus, and so soaks up and absorbs its opposite into itself. This is a dark saying, I know, when thus expressed in terms of common logic, but I cannot wholly escape from its authority.

James, ibid.

Neither can one escape the implication that these extraordinary states of mind, whether induced by chemicals, spiritual enlightenment, or profound metaphysical insight, and which are according to James “so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness”, are characterized precisely by the lack of “contradictoriness and conflict” that must mark our normal, rational awareness. It is those states of mind revered by mystics and sages that are apparently singular and free from contradiction, not the quotidian mode of consciousness employed in our daily life. Yet what is also surprising is that the multiple and conflicting facts of what happens when I look at Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* pose no problems for me during that act of looking; they don’t make my normal conscious perception impossible. Rather they seem to constitute its very essence.

### Supporting views

It is not novel to propose that consciousness is disunited or that our waking thoughts can be contradictory, although it may be novel to combine these propositions in the way suggested here. A number of researchers have doubted whether perception and conscious experience are bound into a unity. Some have been careful to call it an “intuition” rather than accepting it as a given fact (Engel et al, 1999, p. 125), while a few have specifically argued against the necessity for any binding process altogether, at least in the case of object perception (Taraborelli, 2005. See also the debate raised on this question by Bennett and Hacker, 2003). Daniel Dennett’s ‘multiple channels’ model (Dennett, 1991) and Semir Zeki’s ‘micro-consciousness’ model (Zeki and Bartels, 1998) also to some extent loosen up the notion of a monolithic, singular frame of conscious experience, while O’Brien and Opie (1998) argue for a ‘multi-track polyphonic’ model in which consciousness is “manifold and distributed” and explicitly disunited.

Concerning the proposition that the normal, conscious mind might also be irrational, or at least able to accommodate contradictory ideas simultaneously and without crisis, I have already cited Alan Paskow’s “dual vision” and Richard Gregory’s “double reality” claims concerning representation. But the philosopher and logician Graham Priest (2002) goes further in advocating a *dialethic* approach to the understanding of reality which acknowledges “true contradictions" imposed by the limits of thought. For Priest, when we consider the extreme boundaries of expression, cognition and conception, and indeed the unity of thought, we are faced in each case with an unavoidable contradiction. For instance, when thinking about the unthinkable we immediately render it thinkable (ibid, p. 169). Such contradictions and paradoxes

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16 In which case there is a potential anomaly in James’ classification: “ordinary consciousness” he describes as rational (presumably free from contradiction), yet in the “other forms of consciousness” all contradictions and conflicts are “melted into unity”, implying that ordinary consciousness is, again by contrast, irrational, non-unified and fragmentary. Interpreted thus, James’ characterisation of ‘ordinary consciousness’ would be consistent with the one proposed here.

17 I’m grateful to Dario Taraborelli for pointing out other authors who have, in one way or another, questioned the philosophical and neurobiological bases of the binding problem, including Garson (2001), Hurley (1998), O’Regan and Noë (2001), Van der Heijden (1995), Wolff (2004), and Rensink (2000).
are a nuisance for classical Western logical systems, which by and large abhor them. Priest’s solution is to defend an alternative logical system that embraces such contradictions as “true”, so allowing conflicting conditions to exist simultaneously and without mutual negation\(^\text{18}\). It is a fascinating argument that cannot be given justice here, but I introduce it as a further example of recent philosophical work that is consistent with the spirit of what I propose.

Further support for the propositions discussed here can be found both in the substantial literature on self-deception (e.g. Mele, 1997), some of which offers empirical evidence for the simultaneous existence of contradictory beliefs within the same subject (e.g. Sahdra and Thagard, 2003), and the ‘extended self’ model proposed by Shaun Gallagher in which “…the self is the sum total of its narratives and includes within itself all of the equivocations, contradictions, struggles and hidden messages that find expression in personal life … this extended self is decentered, distributed and multiplex.” (Gallagher, 2000).

Closing remarks

None of the work just cited incontrovertibly settles the issue of whether consciousness is either unified or self-consistent. I refer to it here only to demonstrate that the following, admittedly speculative, proposition is not necessarily anomalous within the literature:

*My observations about my experience when looking at the painting suggest normal, waking consciousness may be better understood as a collection of diverse and often conflicting mental events. It is not the convergence of these events into a coherent singularity, but the ongoing relations of tension and friction between them that mark the vibratory experience of lived consciousness.*

Finally, however interesting these observations on the act of looking at a painting might be to those of us studying the nature of the mind they remain subjective and therefore of limited value in moving us closer to any objective account of consciousness. I have asked the reader wishing to engage with my argument to put themselves in a like situation in respect of a similar painting and consider carefully whether their own responses accord with mine. If so this may provide a degree of corroboration. But given that most of the arguments concerning the unity or otherwise of the mind and it’s rational operation have to date been conceptual, it would be interesting to apply some of the current array of data gathering tools available to psychologists and neurologists (EEG, MEG, fMRI, etc.) and some ingenious experimental design to the issue addressed here: to determine empirically whether our normal conscious awareness is better characterised as unified and rational or fragmentary and contradictory. This would seem to be of fundamental importance in the quest to understand consciousness.

References

\(^{18}\) It should be made clear that such contradictions for Priest are not ‘irrational’ per se, but only appear so when measured against what he regards as the limitations of classical logic.


**About the author**

Robert Pepperell is an artist and writer. Trained at the Slade School of Art, he has exhibited widely and published many articles and books, including *The Posthuman Condition* (2003), *The Postdigital Membrane* (2000) and *Screen Consciousness* (2006, both in collaboration with Michael Punt). He is a member of the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness, The British Psychological Society, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, an Associate Editor with the journal *Leonardo*, and a Reader in Fine Arts at University of Wales Institute Cardiff, where he is also Head of Fine Art.