

The Mind's Construction: The Ontology of Mind and Mental Action, by Matthew Soteriou. Oxford, OUP, 2013. Pp. xii + 381. H/b £60.00, P/b £25.00.

Some of the best philosophy is done when someone with the patience, understanding and technical ability to do so, focuses on issues of detail in an area, while maintaining the breadth of vision to zoom out again, once the detailed work is done, to explain its momentous consequences for larger questions. Matthew Soteriou has these abilities in spades, and *The Mind's Construction* is a marvellous example of how the trick should be turned. The book is essentially a fairly comprehensive, ontologically-focused treatment of most of the central areas of philosophy of mind, and is organized into two parts. The first deals with sensory consciousness, and includes discussions of perceptual experience, bodily sensation, imagination and perceptual recollection. The second half deals with the sorts of conscious cognitive activity that conscious subjects can engage in—for example, conscious calculation, deliberation, suppositional reasoning, and self-critical reflection. The main aim of the first part, on which I shall focus here, is to show that work in the ontology of mind that focuses on what Soteriou calls 'distinctions of temporal character'—essentially, differences such as those between things which go on through time, or occur at times, or endure through time, etc.—can shed a great deal of light upon the phenomenology of perception and consciousness. The ambition of the second part is to apply these ontological considerations also to the topic of various sorts of conscious thinking.

A central role is played in the discussions concerning sensory consciousness by something Soteriou calls 'the interdependence thesis'—a claim that takes a bit of explaining. Soteriou is rightly concerned to combat the tendency of much modern philosophy of mind to regard perceptual experience as essentially a matter of the having of mental states which are individuated by representational contents with veridicality conditions. Such accounts, he suggests, are in danger of being unable to capture the fact that our conscious experiences bear certain sorts of distinctive relationship to *time*. Soteriou's inspiration here is often Brian O'Shaughnessy—he quotes with approval O'Shaughnessy's view that '[t]he "stream of consciousness" is such as to necessitate the occurrence of processes and events at all times' (*Consciousness and the World*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, p.43). Moreover, Soteriou endorses O'Shaughnessy's claim that those events and processes cannot merely be identical with, or constituted by, mere changes in the content of representational states; since even when the content of one's perceptual experience is apparently *unchanging*, conscious experience maintains its distinctive relationship to time: 'Even when experience does not change in type or content, it still changes in another respect: it is constantly renewed, a new sector of itself is then and there taking place' (*Consciousness and the World*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, p.42). There is no escaping the fact, according to O'Shaughnessy, that conscious perceptual experience is 'occurrent to the core' (*Consciousness and the World*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, p.49), and Soteriou takes on the task of incorporating O'Shaughnessy's insight into the heart of the philosophy of mind.

How, then, are we to ensure that our philosophy of mind properly captures this aspect of conscious experience? Should we perhaps ditch the mental state, in favour of the mental event or process? But Soteriou is clear that that would not work either. For it is important that when one is asked to reflect on the question what it is like to be undergoing a conscious experience, what one mentions is generally a property (or state) *of oneself*—for example, that it seems to me as though there's a tree in front of me, about ten paces away. We are subjects of experience, and experiences happen *to us*—and that is essential to their nature. So it will not do, in answer to the question, simply to describe certain events and processes—we cannot do so, when these events and processes constitute *experience*, without speaking of ourselves and our properties (which is to speak of *states* of

ourselves). To do justice to *both* aspects of conscious experience—the stative and the occurrent—is the motivation for the interdependence thesis.

According to the interdependence thesis, when we are in a certain sort of representational conscious state, there will always be certain events or processes going on, in virtue of which that representational state obtains. We cannot say what the representational state is without explaining the nature of the kind of event/process that occurs when it obtains. But equally, we cannot characterise the nature of the relevant events and processes without adverting to the kind of representational state which obtains when they occur. The occurrent and the stative are interdependent when it comes to the conscious mind; we cannot do without either, and the characterisation of each is dependent on the other.

To see how this is supposed to work in practice, consider the conscious state of being in pain. According to Soteriou, when one is in pain, that is always going to be because something occurrent is going on in a particular bit of one's body—there will be an event or process occurring in one's shoulder, say (if that is where the pain is). One cannot characterise the state of being in pain properly without mentioning this event, located in one's shoulder. But equally, one cannot characterise the pain-event, an essentially mental phenomenon, except by reference to the way it makes one feel: one must say, for example, 'I am in pain!' No subject-independent account of its nature is possible. The event/process depends on the representational state with content for the specification of its nature; but equally, the state depends on the event/process for its own characterisation. There is a kind of circularity here, to be sure—but Soteriou makes an excellent case for thinking that the circularity is virtuous. For it is a circularity which promises to explain (and perhaps even explain away?) a number of tenacious and problematic intuitions which dog the philosophy of mind.

What are these intuitions? One is the persistent worry that purely representational accounts of consciousness 'miss something out'—specifically, that they miss out the phenomenal character of experience. On Soteriou's view, this will in fact be true, to the extent that no mention is made, in the representational account, of the essentially conscious events, the occurrence of which is constitutive of the representational state's existence. Another is the (somewhat opposed) intuition that one cannot specify the phenomenal properties of experience without making some reference to the experience's *intentional* properties—to the way in which objects in the subject's vicinity are represented by the experience as being. A third intuition is the idea that there is an unbridgeable 'explanatory gap' associated with the attempt to understand conscious experience in functional terms. The possible promise of the interdependence thesis as a way of diagnosing the source of all these perennial philosophical worries is striking; and it is hard not to believe that Soteriou must be right to suppose that if the thesis is to be judged on its capacity to illuminate the questions that just won't go away, it has a very great deal to recommend it.

If there is a problem with *The Mind's Construction*, it is simply that it is very hard indeed. It is long. It is dense. The material is not easy, and digesting it requires a lot of patience and difficult thinking. But its hardness is not really any fault of Soteriou's. Indeed, in many ways, he is an extraordinarily patient writer, who takes the time constantly to recap, to gather together what has been gleaned so far from the chapter to ensure that the reader can follow the structure of what is being argued. But the material itself is simply difficult—and because it is so very wide-ranging, it requires of its readers a willingness to think right across philosophy of mind, in a way relatively unrelieved by powerful examples, sharply defined paradoxes, etc., of the kind that makes focused philosophical thinking easy. Nevertheless, I urge fellow philosophers of mind to take the plunge, wrap their heads in cold towels, and attempt to think alongside Soteriou, through the issues with which he engaged. I have

not read anything for years which so filled me with excitement and conviction of its importance. Admittedly, as someone with longstanding interests in the ontology of mind, I am perhaps more centrally in the target readership than many other readers will be; and more inclined, perhaps, than the average reader, to regard the ontological issues with which Soteriou wrestles as utterly crucial to philosophy of mind. But if anyone were to make it through to the end of *The Mind's Construction*, having retained the view that no one needs to worry about the differences between such things as events, processes and states, I should be both very surprised, and also disposed to think that the cold towel might not perhaps have been cold enough.

Having said that, I do not, of course, agree with everything Soteriou says. I think his central category of "occurrent state" is more problematic than he acknowledges and that some tweaking is necessary in order to make the central theses work out satisfactorily (see my 'Occurrent States', forthcoming in Rowland Stout (ed.), *Process, Action and Experience* (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming 2017)). But *The Mind's Construction* makes light dawn across vast swathes of philosophy of action, in epistemology, in the philosophy of perception and in the philosophy of consciousness. It is a marvellous book, with which it is absolutely impossible to remain unimpressed.

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