



Combining Minds: How to Think about Composite Subjectivity

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Concluding Remarks

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter draws together the previous chapters' ideas and considers one remaining question: If mental combination is possible, why have so many people thought it impossible? Why does combining minds seem so strange and perplexing? The chapter argues that the idea is hard for us partly because of contingent facts about human (and more broadly vertebrate) anatomy, and partly because of the way that common conceptual confusions and uncertainties about consciousness and composition interact with each other. Because of these uncertainties, any answer to the major objections against mental combination will seem to miss something important, and only by developing more than one combinationist theory can combinationism be defended at all.

Keywords: composition, consciousness, panpsychism, personal identity, collective intentionality, functionalism, metaphysics, unity of consciousness, combination problem

CAN SUBJECTIVITY BE composite? Can the consciousness of a whole be a mere combination of the consciousness of its parts? My guiding thought in this book has been that there is something difficult to understand in this idea, that makes it tempting to reject it out of hand. This rejection—the thesis I have called “anti-combination”—constrains the way we think about minds, ruling out otherwise promising theories of consciousness (like constitutive Russellian panpsychism) and making consciousness seem like an alien irruption into nature. My aim has been to understand and analyze both what arguments can be made against composite subjectivity and how a positive theory of composite subjectivity—a “combinationist” theory—might be built to resist these arguments. In this final

chapter I recap the ideas of the preceding eight chapters and consider where the anti-combination intuition comes from and what gives it its force.

9.1. Many Problems and Many Theories

In the previous eight chapters I have considered, and sought to refute, several arguments for anti-combination, which in chapter 1 I divided into internal problems, bridging problems, and lack-of-theory problems. Chapter 2 surveyed **(p.295)** five “internal problems” for combinationism, which seemed to show the in-principle impossibility of any kind of composite subjectivity: the subject-summing argument, the unity argument, the privacy argument, the boundary argument, and the incompatible contexts argument.

I sketched the outlines of responses to these arguments in chapter 2. In particular, I argued for rejecting strong privacy and strong independence (which rule out experience-sharing and grounding between any nonidentical subjects) as overstatements of the more reasonable principles of weak privacy and weak independence (which rule out experience-sharing and grounding between any nonoverlapping subjects). And I argued for distinguishing several sorts of conscious unity, so as to find for each one an appropriate way to thread between the unity, boundary, and incompatible contexts arguments. Chapters 3, 5, and 7 then filled in these outlines in different ways, reflecting different assumptions about conscious subjects and conscious unity.

Subsequent chapters added several “bridging problems,” concerned with whether the specific sorts of minds we encounter in the world could combine or arise through combination. More specifically, in chapter 4 I considered the palette argument and the revelation argument, both aiming to rule out the kind of mental combination posited by panpsychism, where human consciousness is constituted by that of the fundamental physical entities; in chapters 4 and 5 I considered the mismatch argument, that combinationism cannot explain the structure and content of human consciousness; and in chapter 7 I considered the arguments that subjects in compositional relations could not have the kind of self-consciousness, or the kind of agency, that we take ourselves to have.

None of these arguments is sound. The palette and revelation arguments fail because diverse elements can be manifest in consciousness in a distinctively qualitative way, as ingredients in a blended quality whose subject cannot introspectively isolate them from each other. The mismatch argument fails because complex structured content can arise intelligibly out of the structured superimposition of simple conscious fields, corresponding to the integration of information between the subjects of those simpler fields. And the arguments from self-consciousness and agency fail because distinct subjects who interact in volitionally harmonious ways, aligning their wills with each other’s will, can be expected to perceive each other as extensions of themselves and can be properly regarded as jointly the agents of actions taken by each.

Lying behind these specific objections is the more basic lack-of-theory problem. Nagel (1986, 50), for example, writes, “We cannot at present understand how a mental event could be composed of myriad proto-mental events on the model of our understanding of how a muscle movement is composed of myriad **(p.296)** physicochemical events. . . . We lack the concept of a mental part-whole relation.” Over the course of the past six chapters I have developed and defended not one but three combinationist theories:

- In Division 1, I presented panpsychist combinationism, on which the material universe is suffused with elemental consciousness, phenomenal unity is the inner nature of (one or all) the fundamental physical relations, and aggregates inherit the elementary experiences of their parts.
- In Division 2, I presented functionalist combinationism, on which when conscious parts of some system interact in such a way that their experiences have control over, sensitivity to, and coordination with other events in the system, the system inherits those experiences.
- In Division 3, I presented psychological combinationism, on which sets of unified experiences constitute subjects, and subsets of *more* unified experiences within them constitute component subjects.

These three theories could be viewed as rivals, with conflicting accounts of consciousness and its combination, or they could be viewed as allies, illuminating different and complementary aspects of reality. (I prefer the latter.) Even if they are seen as rivals, they can “share resources”; for instance, the account of self-consciousness given in chapter 7, the account of representational unity given in chapter 5, and the account of phenomenal blending given in chapter 4, each might be employed in defending any of the three theories.

Fundamentally, my aim has not been to persuade the reader that these theories are true (though I think they are); it has been to use these theories to undermine anti-combination by showing multiple, consistent, plausible ways that minds might combine. In the remainder of this chapter I consider a lingering question about anti-combination: What explains the intuitive attraction so many people have felt toward it—if it is false, why does it seem so compelling?

9.2. The Oddness of Humans

I think the ultimate explanation of the anti-combination intuition depends partly on contingent facts about humans, and partly on necessary facts about consciousness and composition. The contingent fact about humans is that we never have occasion to think about overlapping subjects: all the complex consciousness we have ever encountered comes in very well-defined and well-protected units—human and animal brains, highly integrated internally and sharply separated externally. It has only ever been useful to us to think about the minds of whole animals, **(p.297)** which do not overlap with one another, and so

we developed (both in the sense of “evolved” and in the sense of “learned”) systems for thinking about minds that assumed that any nonidentical minds would also be nonoverlapping.

Reinforcing this, the volitional harmony that obtains between the parts of an animal brain serves to obscure their distinctness from each other, and from the animal itself. “Harmoniously connected” subjects have little evidence that they are many, because they function as one, with one will. Like human beings in a cooperative group, they feel the boundary between “us” and the rest of the world more keenly than the boundary between “me” and the rest of “us”; unlike human beings in a cooperative group, they have never operated alone and have no secure private domain of thoughts they can conceal from the others. Because the many subjects who I am operate in such consistent harmony, their many-ness is never salient to each other, and insofar as they become self-aware, they are aware only of themselves as one.

It is hard to imagine oneself into the perspective of someone who is very different in their temperament and life experiences; it is even harder to imagine oneself into the perspective of someone who is very different in the basic structure of their consciousness. In this book I have discussed subjects who undergo many experiences that are weakly, if at all, unified with their other experiences; I have discussed subjects all of whose experiences are richly unified with the experiences of other subjects. I have discussed subjects with unity only among some parts of their minds, and subjects living through the process of merging with another subject. If human beings struggle to understand what it is like to be, say, a chimpanzee, or even a human being with a very different outlook, how much more will they struggle to make sense of beings like these?

So for creatures constructed like us, it is both extremely hard to identify or track conscious subjects who are not maximal, and also generally of little use. And as far as we know, we are the only creatures who have developed a sophisticated, abstract, understanding of the mind and consciousness. I think in developing this understanding we have often taken genuine insights (such as weak privacy, weak independence, and the observation that the relations between two humans’ experiences are quite different from any that obtain among one human’s experiences) and mistakenly formulated them into stronger, false principles (such as strong privacy, strong independence, and the idea that the relations between two humans’ experiences are fundamentally discontinuous with those that obtain among one human’s experiences). Moreover, because there is generally for each human being *both* a well-defined single substrate of experience and a well-defined single persona, we have little need to distinguish the two, and our everyday idea of a conscious subject mingles the metaphysical

and psychological conceptions of **(p.298)** subjecthood. This makes it hard for us even to grasp clearly what division and composition of subjects would mean.

In short, the problem is that all the philosophy we know of has been done by humans. But this is simply an observation of what has happened so far on this particular planet. There are creatures whose nervous systems do not match our pattern of separate, stable, well-integrated, and well-insulated units: starfish, cephalopods, even eusocial insect colonies. There are rare human beings who also do not match the standard pattern: craniopagus conjoined twins, split-brain patients, and people with dissociative identity disorder. And if and when our technology allows for the creation of intelligent, conscious beings, they are very likely to also violate the human pattern in various ways—shifting between or sharing bodies, saving their minds into one another’s like some sort of psychological virus, or even living permanently on the internet, indifferent to their physical realization in any particular server or device.

If creatures like this—whose mental lives are not entirely and permanently carried on in sharply separated, internally well-integrated, easily countable units—became intelligent enough to think about minds as such, to develop an everyday “theory of mind” and a scientific psychology, I think they would not share our inclination to endorse anti-combination. Their form of life would force them to confront some of the complex ways that conscious beings can compose and contain one another, and they would likely develop words, customs, and even emotions specifically designed to manage those complexities.

9.3. Why Is This All So Confusing?

I do not think, however, that less sharply individuated beings would find *no* philosophical difficulties in thinking about mental combination; after all, familiarity with things like linguistic communication, political association, and free choice has not saved humans from deep philosophical perplexity over these topics. And on the topic of composite subjectivity, I think there are some genuine conceptual issues that would impede clear thinking on this topic by any creature, human or not.

At root, the problem is that most of the concepts involved in mental combination (consciousness, composition, subjecthood, unity) are subject to conflicting intuitions, generating opposing conceptions which are both very hard to keep separate and also very different in their implications. In chapter 3, section 3.5, I argued that two particular forms of this kind of conceptual ambivalence contributed to making the subject-summing argument seem stronger than it is. First, the ease of confusing wholes as aggregates and wholes as true units makes it seem **(p.299)** conceivable that parts and wholes exist with independent, noncorresponding properties (leading ultimately to the absurd result that tables might not exist, even though particles arranged tablewise do). And second, the ease of confusing access-consciousness with phenomenal

consciousness can make the division-relativity of access-consciousness seem like clear evidence of the division-relativity of phenomenal consciousness (even though, according to panpsychist combinationism, phenomenal consciousness is division-invariant).

More generally, the diversity of conceptions available for what conscious subjects are and what conscious unity is has the result that almost none of the five arguments introduced in chapter 2 can be given a single straightforward response. This is why I had to develop multiple combinationist theories, to offer multiple responses to these arguments. The subject-summing argument is a prime example: psychological combinationism and functionalist combinationism both respond to it by analyzing what it takes for a subject to exist, but employ quite different analyses (a functionalist one and a Neo-Lockean one), while panpsychist combinationism treats subjecthood as primitive, and so needs a very different response, based on the substantive indiscernibility of parts and aggregates. Given the starting point of any one of these responses, the other responses will seem completely inappropriate. But all three starting points have some intuitive pull; as a result no response by itself is liable to feel satisfactory.

The same goes for the unity argument: one starting point is the intuition that two beings might interact, converse, and cooperate as much as we like, without that ever being enough to guarantee phenomenal unity between their experiences. Panpsychist combinationism accepts this, and responds that phenomenal unity need not be guaranteed by any pattern of interaction, because it was there all along, a fundamental relation that pervades our universe. But the implication of this, that my experiences are already unified with everyone else's, will seem clearly absurd from the opposite starting point, which sees phenomenal unity as indissociable from various kinds of functional unity. Functionalist combinationism offers an account of unity based on this starting point, but that account will seem to miss the point relative to the first starting point. Again, no response by itself can accommodate all the relevant intuitions.

I think there is an interaction between the previous section's point, that we are familiar only with a particularly neatly packaged sort of consciousness, and that all the concepts involved are hazardously easy to become confused by. When we venture to think about minds less neatly packaged than human ones, we will inevitably encounter perplexities and seeming contradictions, because it is so hard to **(p.300)** keep a clear grasp on how to think about composition, consciousness, or any of the other concepts involved. But because our topic is so unfamiliar and speculative, it will seem as though those perplexities and contradictions come from the very idea of mental combination. In this book I have tried to show that mental combination is not the problem; when we settle on consistent ideas about other topics, the objections to it can all be answered.

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