



## What are the elements of experience?

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### Abstract

Several debates about conscious experience make reference to its parts, aspects, components, or, as we might neutrally say, elements. Are these elements themselves experiences? Are they unified with each other, and if so how? Are they more basic than, or less basic than, the whole field of consciousness? Or are there not really any distinct elements within experience at all? But it is not always clear what it means for experience to be divisible into many elements, and different conceptions of such elements may entail different, even opposing, answers to these debated questions. I argue that there are broadly two ways of thinking of the elements of experience: as *constituent elements*, the underlying parts that make something up, defined by their potential for independent existence, and as *manifest elements*, the distinguishable aspects that the subject can tell apart. I argue, moreover, that there is no obvious reason to assume that these two sorts of elements will line up with one another, and that this has important implications in multiple debates about the structure of conscious experience.

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Talking about the structure of something usually involves talking about the relations among its elements. Thus talking about the structure of conscious experience will naturally involve talking about the relations among the elements of conscious experience. But what *are* the elements of conscious experience? What does it mean to talk about experience as having multiple parts, bits, aspects, or whatever we call them? Such talk is very common and intuitive: after all, clearly our experience is not one big undifferentiated mass, so we cannot help but talk about this or that particular element, or its relations to other elements. And doing so is often theoretically important, for instance in debates about phenomenal holism, the unity of consciousness, mental combination, or experiential microstructure. But it is not always clear what it means, or whether everyone who talks in this way means the same thing.

I will argue that there are two quite different, even somewhat opposed, things that we can mean by talking about the elements (or parts, bits, aspects, etc.) of experience: constituent elements and manifest elements. Failing to distinguish the two, I will argue, can encourage confusion about the structure of experience. In particular, it risks leading us to hastily infer strong metaphysical conclusions about constituent elements from phenomenological premises about manifest elements, often prematurely closing off attractive metaphysical positions, such as (to name the one closest to my heart) constitutive panpsychism. So clarity about the difference between constituent elements and manifest elements is important for having a clear-eyed view of our options.

## 1 Constituent elements

By “constituent elements” I mean something like the metaphysician’s notion of a mereological part: entities with their own existence, which compose a certain sort of whole when related in the right way.<sup>1</sup> For example, we might say that the Tyrrhenian sea is a constituent element of the Mediterranean sea, and has smaller portions of water as its own constituents. And any

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Leonard and Goodman, 1940, Lewis, 1991, Cotnoir, 2013.

portion of water contains water molecules as constituents, which contain hydrogen and oxygen atoms, which have further subatomic constituents.

I say “something like” the mereologist’s notion of a part because the very general and formal sense of parthood employed by formal mereology, may or may not correspond to the intuitive sense of parthood employed in everyday language, or to anything in reality (see, e.g., Simons, 1987, Varzi, 2006, 2014, Johansson, 2006, Sider, 2007, 2013), and because my aim is to latch onto the idea of components that build something up, as opposed to aspects an observer can distinguish, and for that aim I can be substantially agnostic about the truths of mereology.<sup>2</sup>

A key feature of constituent elements, in my sense, is that they are capable, at least in principle, of independent existence. The atoms of a water molecule are not conceptually dependent on each other: each could exist even if the others were separated from it, or entirely annihilated. Likewise, the molecules of the Tyrrhenian sea can exist separately from it (you can go and take them away in a bucket), and the Tyrrhenian could still exist if the rest of the Mediterranean were cut off from it or annihilated.

Of course there are caveats to this mutual independence of constituent elements. If the rest of the Mediterranean were annihilated, the Tyrrhenian would not survive for very long - it would collapse outwards into the empty space left behind. But the very fact that we can sensibly talk about what *would* happen under such circumstances underlines that it is a perfectly coherent scenario, and not an incoherent chimera, like a square circle, a smile without a face, or a heartbeat without a heart. Moreover, even if constituent elements could exist by themselves, they might then be importantly different in their properties. Hydrogen atoms in a water

<sup>2</sup> More generally, my aim is to remain neutral about the ultimate metaphysics of the concrete particular things of the world—whether they are tropes, substances, events, or something else. Likewise I will try, in sections 3 and 4, to remain neutral about the best metaphysics of consciousness. The notion of a constituent element is connected to metaphysics in that metaphysics is concerned with figuring out what things are constitutively made up of, but the notion does not by itself commit to any specific metaphysics. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this point.

molecule have different electrical properties than solitary hydrogen atoms, because of their covalent bonds with the oxygen atom. And of course these parts might often be vaguely bounded (like the Tyrrhenian, which merges smoothly into the Ionian and other seas), or arbitrary (like any given bucketful of water, before you gather it up in your bucket). But these caveats do not undermine the basic distinguishing feature of constituent parts, their potential separation from the wholes they form.

In some systems these caveats to the independence of constituents might become so significant that for practical purposes it is misguided to think of them as separable parts. Call such systems ‘weakly holistic’. It is technically true, for instance, that a human body can be separated into various organs and tissues: these are constituents of it (not mere aspects or properties). But these parts are intimately dependent on each other and thus on the whole body in several important ways. They make a huge difference to the way the others function; they keep each other supplied with what each needs to persist; they all grew from a common origin; they are likely to all cease functioning at the same time. This kind of weak holism is often important, and if we consider the constituents of such a system in too isolated a way we are likely to go wrong, but this does not show that these systems don’t have constituent elements.

Focusing on the possibility of separate existence might not ultimately be the best or most revealing definition of the intuitive notion I am appealing to. Better definitions might appeal to fundamentally mereological notions, supervenience bases, independent instantiation of properties, or something else. For my purposes the gloss of “elements that could possibly exist without the whole” is enough to distinguish the notion of a constituent part from the notion of a manifest part, to which I now turn.

## 2 Manifest elements

By the “manifest elements” of something, I mean whatever within it can be distinguished from other elements by some specified observer. In some contexts the relevant observer may be something like “a typical human

being under normal conditions”, in other contexts it may be an observer who is privileged somehow. In the case of consciousness, the most salient observer will be the conscious subject themselves. Whereas constituent elements reflect a division of something into the underlying things which come together to make it up, manifest elements reflect a division by an observer, based on their capacity to attend to it in different ways and make discriminations within it.

My aim here is not to attempt a precise definition of manifest elements, but simply to make the modest intuitive case that not all manifest elements will also be constitutive elements, and vice versa.<sup>3</sup> I do take manifest elements to be in some sense particulars, not universals: an observer can distinguish the color and shape of a red square, but the manifest elements in my sense would not simply be redness in general or squareness in general, but something like instances of redness and squareness, aspects of the red square, tropes, events of a property being instantiated, or whatever analysis is preferred.

Of course, sometimes the two sorts of elements match up. For instance, the head is a manifest element of a human body, in that most observers can readily distinguish that part from others, and it is also a constituent element, in that it could exist without the rest of the body (albeit probably in a very poor condition). But some constituent elements are not manifest elements: we might think of “all the neutrons in the body” as a constituent of the body, but no observer can pick out that element from the rest. (And parts like “the endocrine system” are only manifest to observers with advanced theoretical knowledge and a lot of tools.) And conversely some manifest elements are not constituent elements, like the poles of a bar magnet, which can be distinguished by their opposite causal effects but which could not, even conceivably, be separated from one another. Likewise, we might distinguish elements of someone’s facial expression (the wrinkling of their nose, the sardonic curl to their lips, the twinkling of their eyes), based on observers being able to distinguish them (perhaps unconsciously) and draw different

<sup>3</sup> Note in particular that this means manifest elements are not a subset of parts, the way that we speak of a thing’s salient (constituent) parts, or detached (constituent) parts. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this point.

meanings from them, without any suggestion that the face came to be through these entities being put together.

### 3 Does this distinction extend to consciousness?

I hope the general distinction between manifest and constituent elements is relatively clear and plausible, but applying it to the case of conscious experience raises difficulties. In particular, it might be thought to be a conceptual truth about consciousness that it reveals its whole nature to its subject (the so-called “revelation thesis”<sup>4</sup>), and thus that manifest and constituent elements must perfectly coincide.

But first we should try to get clear on what it means to speak of manifest elements of conscious experience. There is, as noted above, a specific very salient observer to think about: the subject themselves. So we can very naturally understand the manifest elements of consciousness in terms of elements which a subject can distinguish within their experience. In this sense, it’s clear that human consciousness has a vast diversity of manifest elements: each of us, reflecting on our present experience, can distinguish a huge range of specific sensations, thoughts, twinges, impulses, and so on. But there are a few potentially different senses in which we can talk about what a subject “can distinguish”. One is in terms of introspection: consciousness can be divided into manifest elements if the subject can introspectively focus on them and pick them out. One worry is that this definition may break down when applied to beings which can’t introspect (e.g. fairly simple animals); then we might prefer a definition in terms of cognitive access: consciousness can be divided into manifest elements if the subject’s cognition can selectively access one or the other aspect of its experience, e.g. to direct its attention at different external objects, guide different actions, etc. Alternatively, we might define manifest elements of consciousness by reference to some sort of functional differentiation: does

the functioning of the cognitive system distinguish them? Or thirdly, if we think that phenomenal consciousness and cognitive access can come apart, then we might think that phenomenal consciousness *per se*, independent of any specific functional capacities, presents us with an array of manifestly distinct elements. For an obvious example, a visual experience as of the top side of a six-sided die seems to involve many distinct things - six black spots on a white face. Indeed, the spatial expanse of the white face seems to present us with many distinct white locations, and moreover both colour and shape properties.

Perhaps our sense that experience presents many distinct aspects can in fact be exhaustively captured by talking about functional capacities we have (e.g. to selectively attend to one dot or another, or to think about their similarities and differences). But this is not obvious. So for the sake of neutrality we might consider defining the manifest elements of consciousness by reference to the notion of *phenomenal contrast* (drawn from Roelofs, 2019, p. 124-126). Two or more elements of an experience phenomenally contrast when the subject is “phenomenally aware” of their being distinct in virtue of having that experience, where “phenomenal awareness” is a relation that subjects always have to the phenomenal character of their experiences, and which may or may not be reducible to any set of functional or representational notions. For example, we might think that an experience of blue and yellow stripes exhibits phenomenal contrast, in that just by having (and thus being phenomenally aware of) the experience, one is phenomenally aware of the blue and yellow being distinct colours. But it might also be possible to have an experience in which blue and yellow were phenomenally present, without phenomenally contrasting: Roelofs (2014a and 2019) suggests that experiences of homogeneous green might, for all we know, be such experiences, where blueness and yellowness both contribute to what it’s like to have the experience but are not presented to the subject as distinct manifest elements.

I take no stand here on which of the above ways of defining the manifest elements of consciousness is best. Fortunately, different forms of discrimination clearly have some sort of connection: in general, experiences displaying phenomenal contrast also seem to allow for distinct cognitive access and

<sup>4</sup> For discussion see Lewis, 1995, p. 141-42, Chalmers, 2003, Stoljar, 2009, Liu, 2019.

introspective recognition. So while it seems clear that human experience comprises a great many manifest elements at any given time, there is room for different ways of defining them, by reference to different ways that a subject can be said to be aware of their own experience.

The main point I wish to defend is that none of these ways of defining manifest elements need to imply anything about constituent elements, i.e. about whether and how human consciousness is built up out of many different things put together.

But doesn't the revelation thesis challenge precisely this point? Intuitively, we might think that the normal separation between constituent and manifest elements does not hold in the case of conscious experience, because conscious experience *just is* what is manifest to the subject, and so manifest divisions simply are constituent divisions. But I don't think this follows. It's true that we should resist thinking of conscious experience as an object which the subject then observes, like a painting which an external viewer gazes upon. This would start a vicious regress: the viewer's gazing upon it would be the actual conscious experience we were interested in. But we don't need to lapse into this sort of mistake in order to think that conscious experience (the process of certain things being manifest to a subject) might have a metaphysical structure that is not manifest to the subject. Not every fact about an act of observing is observable, after all.

The revelation thesis is an attempt to formulate this idea that conscious experience is a special case. But that thesis comes in stronger and weaker forms. Very strong forms, such as the idea that everything about the metaphysics of my current conscious field must be accessible to me, would indeed rule out any divergence between constituent and manifest elements. After all, the constituent elements of my current experience are a fact about its metaphysics, and if the revelation thesis requires them to be revealed to me then that will require them to qualify as manifest elements (at least in some sense). But making the revelation thesis this strong makes it correspondingly less plausible, and standard formulations are often weaker. Moreover, they often apply to particular "experiences" (see e.g. Lewis, 1995, p. 141, Stoljar, 2006, p. 228), thus raising precisely the ambiguity over constituent and manifest elements that I have noted. One

very natural way to read such formulations is that they apply to manifest elements of experience. That is, they claim that if something is presented to me in experience as a distinct phenomenal particular, such that I can focus my attention on it, reflect on it, form concepts based on it, and so on, then my knowledge of it will be of an especially deep and thorough kind. But that knowledge is usually taken to be knowledge of the phenomenal properties it instantiates—of what it is, in general, to be phenomenally green, or phenomenally painful, etc. It is consistent with this that the underlying structure of constituent elements in the conscious state that contains that manifest element is not thereby revealed. So while very strong forms of the revelation thesis might undermine the application of my distinction to consciousness, weaker and more plausible forms do not. There is certainly more to say about different forms of the revelation thesis, but since I have said some of it in other work (Roelofs, 2020), I will simply note here that the burden, I believe, falls on the proponent of a strong revelation thesis to show why we should prefer it to more moderate available forms.

Of course there might still be another way to infer from one sort of element to the other, but this would be a substantive claim: in general, the manifest elements of something need not also be constituent elements of it, or vice versa. To think that the manifest elements of conscious experience correspond one-to-one with its constituent elements, we need to hear an argument, whether that argument is empirical, conceptual, logical, or something else.

## 4 Implications

The fact that a thing's constituent elements and manifest elements need not line up is significant when thinking about the structure of consciousness. In particular, I think it is crucial to bear in mind when considering the following six questions:

1. Does human consciousness at a given time have parts?
2. If human consciousness does have parts, are they themselves conscious experiences?

3. If human consciousness does have parts, are these parts more fundamental than (“prior to”) or less fundamental than (“posterior to”) the whole that they form?
4. Is consciousness (necessarily or contingently) “unified”?
5. Can conscious minds combine into other conscious minds (the “combination problem”)?
6. Does consciousness have “microstructure”, i.e. structure that is introspectively inaccessible?

I will discuss all of these questions briefly, showing in each case how the constituent/manifest distinction plays out. I’ll begin with the first three, which can be grouped together under the heading of “phenomenal holism” vs. “phenomenal atomism”.

#### 4.1 Phenomenal holism vs. phenomenal atomism

A number of philosophers have argued that human consciousness is, in some important sense, “holistic”.<sup>5</sup> This claim, often contrasted with an opposing position termed “atomism”, may be spelled out in a few ways. The most radical is to say that human consciousness doesn’t have parts at all, that it is in some sense a single, simple, indivisible unit, and any analysis of it into parts is a mistake (see esp. Tye, 2003). A slightly more modest claim is that while we may divide our consciousness into parts, we should refrain from calling these parts “experiences”, on the basis that such a term implies that they are intrinsically conscious, or at least that they each have consciousness independently of the others, and (according to this type of holist) that implication is false. Or, thirdly, the claim of holism might be that whatever parts consciousness can be divided into, these parts are less basic than, and/or grounded in, the whole phenomenal field – that it comes first, and they are derivative from it, rather than the other way around.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Gurwitsch 1963, Dainton, 2010, Chudnoff, 2013.

Note that any of these claims goes well beyond what in section 1 I called ‘weak holism’, the sort of systematic interdependence and mutual conditioning we see among the constituents of a human body. Indeed, they seem to go beyond what any physical system clearly and obviously exhibits. Nevertheless, ideas in this family are often expressed through contrasts between different physical metaphors, such as:

What I take to be the dominant view is [that] we can liken overall conscious experience to a mosaic, onto which small coloured tiles are fitted [...but on an alternative model] our overall experience may not be like a mosaic at all, but instead more like a shallow pool of water, into which a vial of a certain liquid is poured whenever the subject has a certain local experience. (Koksvik, 2014, pp. 112-113)

[We should reject] the building block theory: The conscious field is made up of small components that combine to form the field. (Searle, 2000, p. 572)

[M]ental items must combine in a way that is categorically different from the way in which stones and bricks combine to form a house, or several pieces of a puzzle to yield the whole picture. These simply aren’t the right combinatory models. (Basile, 2010, p. 111)

I am particularly interested in one way of arguing for holism, namely by appealing to phenomenology (by contrast with appealing to logical, explanatory, or metaphysical considerations to support holistic claims). This approach involves encouraging readers to reflect on their own experience and notice that its elements are, in some important sense, not independent atoms which could exist apart and happen to have come together. It may involve appealing to the intimate links between different elements of experience, or asking rhetorically whether a particular experience, richly inflected by its context, could re-appear identically in a different context.

I don’t intend to evaluate the phenomenological case for phenomenal holism: suppose we grant that something about consciousness lets us tell, just by being conscious, that the elements of our experience are more like perturbations or modifications of a single field than like discrete lego bricks

pieced together. The claim I want to make is that even if this is accepted, it does not show as much as it is often taken to show.

The “parts” under consideration in discussions of phenomenal holism are manifest elements of consciousness: particulars which the subject can distinguish from one another. For example, Bayne individuates the experiential parts which he claims are unified into a holistic phenomenal field by reference to the phenomenal property instantiated, and gives examples of phenomenal properties such as “blue occurring in a certain location of space” (2010, p. 25), so as to capture the intuitive thought that we can have multiple simultaneous experiences of the same shade of blue. Here we are individuating elements of consciousness explicitly by reference to the spatial distinctions that are presented to the subject.

But this by itself does not entail anything about constituent elements, and thus does not tell us very much at all about the metaphysics of consciousness. Because the division of constituent elements and the division of manifest elements need not line up, we cannot draw any immediate conclusions about whether human consciousness is built up out of parts, or whether its parts are themselves independently conscious experiences, or whether its parts are more or less fundamental than the whole they compose. There might be additional premises that serve to connect claims about manifest elements with claims about constituent elements, perhaps derived from the revelation thesis or some other source, but those premises would need to be defended explicitly: recognizing the conceptual distinction between manifest and constituent elements puts the burden of proof on those who think they line up.

Thus I am inclined to think that whether human consciousness is *metaphysically* holistic is phenomenologically opaque: we cannot determine this simply by phenomenological reflection, but must instead rely on more theoretical considerations drawn from our best scientific and metaphysical theories about consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>To forestall misunderstanding, I do not mean that phenomenological reflection cannot tell us anything about the metaphysics of consciousness (e.g. whether physicalism is true). I think that our phenomenology gives us constraints on what could possibly explain it (e.g. showing us qualitative aspects which no purely

Still, it is easy in practice to conflate manifest and constituent elements of conscious experience, because we don’t have a ready model available of what the constituent elements could be, if not the manifest elements. We can of course distinguish constituent elements of the brain (e.g. particular neurones, nuclei, lobes, hemispheres), and perhaps constituent elements of neural processes (e.g. a particular synaptic firing might be a constituent element of a cascade). But we are interested in constituent elements of consciousness itself, perhaps elements which are themselves conscious, and so sticking with physical descriptions doesn’t quite address the question directly.

Hence it may be useful to elaborate on one version of the possibility that I think hasty arguments for phenomenal holism risk overlooking. It is a possibility which I happen to think is probably actual, but my aim here is not to argue for it. I just want to show that it is not threatened by the usual ways of arguing for holism. The idea would be that some or all parts of the brain (perhaps overlapping ones) individually generate conscious experiences which are somewhat-independent constituent elements of the whole brain’s total experience, but these experiences are “layered over one another” to form that whole, i.e. combined in such a way that the distinctions which are manifest to the subject cut across multiple layers, rather than cutting between individual layers. As a result, all of these component experiences are experienced by the human subject, but they are not distinguishable by them: they are constituent elements but not manifest elements.

Roelofs (2019, pp. 166-168) suggests something like this, calling it the “superimposition model” of experience combination, and contrasting it with the “canvas model”. The metaphor of a canvas is explicitly used by Coleman (2012, p. 157-158; cf. what Koksvik, 2014, p. 212, calls the “mosaic” model). On the canvas model, each phenomenal constituent has a certain

physical description could explain), but in many cases, including the present case, it does not tell us which of a range of possible underlying explanations is the actually correct one. To put it crudely, phenomenological reflection allows us to rule out physicalism, but does not tell us whether we live in a Cartesian dualist world, a strong emergentist world, a panpsychist world, or something else. For further discussion see Roelofs, 2020.

quality (metaphorically, the colour of the paint) and gets “placed” at a certain location in the field of experience (metaphorically, the canvas). The total experience is then not only entirely constituted by these many “paint patches”, but is also laid out in such a way that the differences between different locations (where the different constituents are placed) are manifest to the subject.

I think the canvas model is easy and tempting, and might turn out to be true<sup>7</sup>, but it is not the only model possible. *A priori*, it’s equally possible that something like the superimposition model obtains. Here’s how Lee describes this sort of model:

Think about a series of photographic layers superimposed on top of each other so that they collectively form an image. Each layer makes its own contribution to the character of the image—some layers add a certain texture, some add a certain shade of color, and so on. Since the layers are stacked on top of each other, they are seamlessly blended together. When we perceptually observe the image, we do not discern the individual layers; rather, we see a unified image. Nevertheless, each layer contributes to how the image appears to us. If a layer were removed, our perceptual experience would change. (Lee, 2019, p. 290; cf. Roelofs, 2019, p. 167, Koksvik, 2014, p. 113)

On this model, human consciousness might be at once *both* very atomistic and very holistic: atomistic because it has many constituent elements, independently conscious phenomenal fields arising from particular brain areas, but simultaneously holistic because if we pick out any of its manifest elements (if we point, so to speak, at one part of the composite image) whatever we point at will reflect the contribution of many different layers, and thus be inseparable from the whole composite. Of course which divisions become manifest may depend on the particular cognitive or introspective capacities of the subject (perhaps a suitably trained or enhanced subject

<sup>7</sup> Roelofs (2019, pp. 166-168) gives some reason to think that the canvas model is unlikely to be true, namely that it leaves the existence and shape of the canvas itself unexplained, and so needs at least two sorts of explanatory resource - the many paint patches, and whatever creates the canvas.

could gain the skill to discern the underlying ‘joints’ between constituent elements, like a skilled animator who becomes able to ‘see’ the different photographic cels). But the superimposition model still implies that we cannot directly draw conclusions about constituent structure from premises about manifest structure.

Of course, the superimposition model does not by itself specify how many layers there are (which subsystems can independently produce consciousness) or how far various manifest distinctions either cross-cut layers or cut between layers. My point is precisely that these questions will depend on what is implied by our best-supported theories, both scientific and philosophical. Once we distinguish manifest and constituent elements, we can see that the phenomenological case for holism may be entirely correct, while leaving the metaphysical questions about the experience’s constituent structure untouched.

## 4.2 The unity of consciousness

What about the unity of consciousness? By this I don’t mean the idea of consciousness as a singular thing with no parts, but rather the idea that all of its parts are connected to each other in some distinctive way. Consciousness as a whole is often thought to be unified in the sense that each element of it is *unified with* the others, which is also sometimes put by saying that it is co-conscious with them, or that they form a single “phenomenal field”.<sup>8</sup>

If we take seriously the distinction between the constituent and manifest elements of consciousness, we can ask whether the relation of unity/co-consciousness applies to one, or the other, or both. Since this unity relation is often introduced ostensively, by inviting the reader to consider the various elements they can distinguish in their experience, it seems to connect manifest elements in the first instance. But it need not follow that it cannot also connect constituent elements.

One common gloss on phenomenal unification is that it involves conjoint phenomenology: there’s not only something it’s like to be in state A,

<sup>8</sup> For discussion, see Bayne and Chalmers, 2003, Bayne, 2010, Schechter, 2013, Roelofs, 2014b, Watzl, 2014.

and something it's like to be in state B, but also something it's like to be in the joint state A+B. Supposing we adopt this (attractive but not universally accepted) analysis, it seems to make sense to apply to both senses of element, because it seems right to say that both elements are consciously experienced. The constituent elements of my consciousness, if any, are experienced together: that is why they make up one experiential field. But it is also clearly true that the manifest elements of my consciousness are experienced together. There might, however, be a difference in *why* they are unified: put crudely, constituent elements might be contingently unified by the relations that tie them together into a whole, while manifest elements (if they do not correspond to distinct constituent elements) might be unified by their very nature, arising inseparably as parts of the same experiential field. This would be a case of a single relation obtaining contingently in one case and necessarily in another, just like the two poles of a bar magnet can stand in certain spatial relations necessarily, while two pebbles can stand in the exact same spatial relations contingently. In the terms of the superimposition model, it might be that different layers contingently stand in the “forming-a-single-image-with” relation, while different regions of the overall multi-layered picture stand in the same relation necessarily.<sup>9</sup>

### 4.3 Mental combination

The constituent/manifest distinction is also important for evaluating the possibility of “mental combination”, here meaning distinct conscious minds combining with one another so as to compose a composite mind that has them as conscious parts. This possibility is especially important for evaluating the prospects of constitutive panpsychism, since panpsychism is often thought to require especially widespread and systematic mental combination, and thus to face a “combination problem” (see e.g. Seager, 1995,

<sup>9</sup> The modal claim here might, of course, be something weaker than full necessity: it might be, for instance, that a given manifest element can only exist if it is unified with *some* other element, or with another element of a particular sort, rather than needing to be unified with the specific other elements it is unified with. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this point.

Chalmers, 2017, Goff, 2017, Roelofs, 2019). However, mental combination is also suggested by certain interesting cases where two or more mind-like subsystems seem to overlap or partially join together (see, e.g., Schechter, 2010, Blackmon, 2016, Carls-Diamante, 2017, Cochrane, 2021), and so making sense of it is not a problem exclusive to panpsychists (cf. Mendelovici, 2020): arguably, everyone ought to be a “combinationist” in principle, with a greater or lesser scope for combination in the actual world depending on one's preferred theory of consciousness.

Note that mental combination is meant to involve a multiplicity of minds, i.e. a multiplicity of subjects. As such it goes well beyond the much more common and familiar idea that a single subject's consciousness can comprise a multiplicity of distinct elements. Nevertheless, there is clearly a connection: it will be harder to make sense of mental combination if we cannot even distinguish diverse elements within a subject's experience. In particular, the most natural way to make sense of mental combination is in terms of “phenomenal sharing”, where particular elements of consciousness belong simultaneously to a whole and to some part of it (for defence see Goff and Roelofs, 2025). Without such sharing, in what sense would the composite mind *contain* the component minds as parts? It would seem to be simply a mind associated with a composite body, some parts of which were associated with separate minds. But if the composite mind is meant to actually contain each component mind, such that the latter's consciousness actually forms part of the former's, we need to ask what sort of “part” we are talking about.

The phenomenal sharing that would facilitate mental combination is best understood as a sharing of constituent elements of consciousness, not manifest ones. The whole point of distinguishing constituent elements of my consciousness is to distinguish elements that have their own independent existence, and thus could potentially be elements of some other subject's experience as well. The significant implication of this is that even if mental combination occurs – even if, as constitutive panpsychism suggests, each of us has a massively composite subjectivity, containing myriad simpler subjectivities within it – we should not assume that any of those subjectivities is simply having “some of our experiences” in the sense of

some of the *manifest* elements of our experience. If our experience is built up of parts, each part might be its own phenomenal field, layered onto the others as on the superimposition model, rather than a paint patch placed alongside the others on a canvas. And then no identifiable part of the overall picture, nothing we can pick out introspectively within our experience, like the smell of green tea or a green circle on our phone screen, would neatly correspond to the consciousness of any particular component subject. Moreover, this means that phenomenal holism is no obstacle to accepting mental combination or phenomenal sharing (contra Basile 2010): combinationists can be both holistic about the manifest elements of consciousness and atomistic about its constituent elements.

#### 4.4 Experiential microstructure

Finally, could our consciousness comprise distinct elements that we don't or even can't notice - what has been called experiential "microstructure"? Again the constituent/manifest distinction is crucial, because if this question is asked about manifest elements, it is likely to get an automatic negative answer. By definition, my consciousness cannot comprise manifest elements, i.e. things which I can introspectively distinguish, which I cannot introspectively distinguish. Of course we might trade on different senses of "distinguish" (there might be elements in experience that I can contrast with each other but cannot attend to separately, or cannot conceptualise independently), or different senses of "can" (there might be elements in experience that I could in principle distinguish but which I have no realistic chance of distinguishing under normal conditions). But if we fix the meanings of relevant terms, the idea of indistinguishable manifest elements of conscious experience is an oxymoron.

By contrast, there is nothing oxymoronic about the idea of indistinguishable constituent elements of conscious experience. This would simply mean constituent elements which not only did not line up with any manifest elements, but could not be lined up with them (could not be made manifest to the subject) under any realistic conditions. This idea has been defended by Lee (2019) and Roelofs (2019, 2020), and may have precursors

in Leibniz's notion of *petites perceptions* (Leibniz, 2012/1686) which are "confused with" one another for the human subject. This idea (experiential microstructure) has been objected to, particularly based on its possible conflict with the revelation thesis, discussed above in section 3. But while I think such objections can be addressed, my aim here is not to defend the idea of experiential microstructure. My aim is just to show how failing to distinguish manifest and constituent elements of something risks rendering the very idea oxymoronic.

## 5 Conclusions

The constituent/manifest distinction problematizes any talk of the relationship between consciousness and "its parts", "its aspects", "its elements", and so on. Such talk is common but, if I am right that constituent elements and manifest elements need not coincide, it is deeply and consequentially ambiguous. The relationship between consciousness and its constituent elements will likely be quite different from the relationship between consciousness and its manifest elements. Moreover, there is likely to be a potential disconnect between what at least some of us are most interested in talking about (the metaphysics of consciousness, for which constituent elements are the most relevant) and what we have the readiest access to (manifest elements, which we can introspectively examine and reflect on). We cannot tell whether consciousness is divisible or composite, atomistic or holistic, from within our perspectives as conscious subjects.

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