Title: Embodiment and the split-brain: an enactive unity

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Abstract:

In her recent excellent and thorough treatment of the consciousness of split-brain patients (Schechter 2018), Elizabeth Schechter defends the position that in these individuals two minds inhabit a single person. We find the argument compelling, and the surprising conclusion validated, if one accepts her (rather neurocentric) starting point—but we do not. In contrast to Schechter, who focuses almost entirely on the inner neural processing and simple responses of split-brain patients in highly controlled experimental settings, we focus instead on the totality of behaviours of the whole embodied subject. From this perspective, what emerges as most striking are the various compensatory behaviours that these patients manifest to overcome the obviously and otherwise disabling effects of their commissurotomy. Such behaviours—for instance self-cueing with gesture or by writing with one hand upon the other—are rather important data in their own right. Here we argue that such behaviours are a sign of, and a means to maintain, an ongoing unity of consciousness. Although it is true that this unity is vulnerable to disruption by circumstances that would have no discernable effect on intact individuals, the fact that these compensatory mechanisms are brought online at all indicates the continuing existence and influence of a set of implicit psychological norms that the patients are striving to maintain. This suggests the existence of a kind of psychological unity missing from Schechter’s account. Such patients, we argue, have one mind, differently instantiated in its physical substrate.