

THE PROBLEM OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE BURDEN OF THE CARTESIAN HERITAGE

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In recent years the subject of Consciousness has gained, or I'd better say regained, a central place in academic discussions. The challenge, issued mainly by philosophers but accepted by thinkers from various disciplines, is to explain how physical processes in the brain give rise to the conscious, qualitative aspects of human experience. What makes this challenge so significant is the apprehension that no satisfying answer can be given. No reductive explanation will be compelling enough, some philosophers maintain, to prevent us from conceiving of a world in which beings that are physically identical to us all the same lack any of the qualitative aspects of our conscious experiences. Understanding the relation between consciousness and the physical world, we are told, is beyond the limits of human capacities. Many have tried to tackle this „Problem of Consciousness”, as it came to be called, some by pointing to its Cartesian roots. Striking at the Cartesian roots of the problem is indeed what Daniel Dennett and John Searle have proposed, each in his own different way. Though I accept that the way out of the problem can only be by reexamining our debt to the Cartesian tradition in the philosophy of mind, I nevertheless disagree with their consequent analyses. In what follows I intend to comment on both Dennett's and Searle's main ideas, while suggesting a different, hopefully a better way of approaching this problem of consciousness. But first I shall say a bit more on what makes consciousness so problematic.

Why do we take sensory qualities to be so uniquely distinct from all physical phenomena? What induces us to believe that facts about phenomenal properties will never be part of what physical sciences could possibly teach us? Interestingly enough, most of the

arguments that support these claims seem to rest upon a shared observation, namely that unlike physical phenomena, the qualitative, conscious aspects of human sensations fail to manifest the distinction between appearance and reality. Their appearance is their reality. Saul Kripke, Thomas Nagel, and more recently Joseph Levine and Scott Sturgeon, all laid out arguments that drew on this observation (see: Kripke, 1980; Levine, 1993; Nagel, 1974; Sturgeon, 1994). I shall go briefly over one of these arguments, perhaps the one better known, that was put forward by Thomas Nagel in his seminal paper „What it is like to be a bat?“. According to Nagel, scientific explanations are objective by their very nature. They are meant to leave behind any account that is based on the particular point of view of the perceiving subject, and strive to reveal the real, objective nature of things that can be apprehended from many different points of view. Science has no interest with the way things appear to the perceiving subject, but with what they really are. „The process of reduction,“ he says, „is a move in the direction of greater objectivity, towards a more accurate view of the real nature of things.“ But, he continues, „if the subjective character of experience is fully comprehensible only from one point of view, then any shift to greater objectivity – that is, less attachment to the specific viewpoint – does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it“ (Nagel, 1979, p. 174). In other words, where the distinction between appearance and reality collapses, as in the case of the qualitative aspects of sensations, reductive explanations are off the point. Eliminating the subjective point of view in such cases will amount to eliminating the only account possible of what these sensory qualities really are. Conscious, subjective facts are therefore irreducible to the objective, physical phenomena, at least not in any illuminating way that might enrich our understanding of them.

Of all the possible approaches to the problem of consciousness, Dennett seems to have chosen the most radical one. By denying the very existence of phenomenal properties, that is of properties that are accessible only from the subjective, first-person point of view, he believes he had solved the problem. We are asked to „play Locke’s card a second time“ as he puts it: instead of taking colors, sounds, etc. to be intrinsic properties of mental states, we should realize that they are, in a way, „secondary“ properties. They are „discriminative states of the observers’ brain [that] have various „primary“ properties (their mechanistic properties due to their connections, the excitation states of their elements, etc.) and in virtue of these primary properties, they have various secondary, merely dispositional properties“ (Dennett, 1991, p. 373). If we tend to think otherwise, Dennett insists, this is only because we are still in the grip of the Cartesian conceptions; we are, what he calls, Cartesian Materialists. While discarding the idea of an immaterial substance, we nonetheless retain the Cartesian notion of a functional center in the brain, the modern equivalent of Descartes’ pineal gland. It is this notion of a „Cartesian Theater“ that Dennett totally rejects: no place in the brain, he claims, is a place where ‘it all comes together’ to be viewed and judged by some ultimate observer. No definite boundaries mark the site of consciousness, therefore no fact of the matter will determine the where

and when of conscious experiences. The existence of phenomenal properties that occupy a definite place in space-time is nothing but a philosophical myth. Instead of the Cartesian Theater metaphor, Dennett proposes an alternative metaphor – his „Multiple Drafts” model of consciousness. In a nutshell, the model posits a parallel, multi-track processing activity of various specialist brain circuits that operate in response to external stimuli. Of the multiple different contents that are being simultaneously created in this process, only some will succeed in affecting subsequent activities and initiating behavioral responses. These contents will become the conscious ones. Due to space limitations I cannot give here a full account of Dennett’s reasons for his alternative model, nor can I offer a detailed criticism of his ideas. But I do want to emphasize one important point. Regardless of how successful it might be in accounting for some aspects of our conscious life, Dennett’s model has no bearing on the question of phenomenal properties. Being, in fact, a functionalist model it cannot explain non-functional properties such as the qualitative aspects of our experience. Acknowledging that, Dennett did propose, as you might remember, to redefine phenomenal properties as „secondary”, dispositional properties. But I take this to be a false move. What we get acquainted with while undergoing sense-experience is something, which is over and above the mere disposition to behave in a this or that way. Or else we would have found it difficult to conceive the possibility of states which are functionally identical, but nonetheless differ in their phenomenal, qualitative aspects. Our ability to understand philosophical arguments such as the Inverted Spectrum Argument indicates, in my view, that phenomenal properties are *not* functional properties. Consequently, Dennett’s attack on Cartesian Materialism cannot pave our way out of the problem of consciousness – by playing the Lockian card once again, we are once again stripping the sensory qualities of their claimed reality, and this time, one may say, only „appearance” is left. This highly counter-intuitive conclusion can hardly be the ultimate solution to our problem.

If Dennett addressed the problem of consciousness by trying to eliminate what causes it, Searle’s suggestion is to reexamine our very reasons for calling it a problem. Irreducible conscious phenomena are natural phenomena, he argues, and it should be as simple as that. Conscious phenomena are higher-order features of the brain, which are caused by the lower-order, neuro-physiological processes. And if it hasn’t been for Cartesianism and its footmarks in our metaphysical conceptions, this statement would not have puzzled us. „Historically, one of the keys to the development [of our contemporary world view],” He says, „was the exclusion of consciousness from the subject matter of science by Descartes, Galileo, and others in the seventeenth century. On the Cartesian view, the natural sciences proper excluded „mind”, *res cogitans*, and concerned themselves only with „matter”, *res extensa*. The separation between mind and matter was a useful heuristic tool in the seventeenth century. A tool that facilitated a grate deal of progress that took place in the sciences. However, the separation is philosophically confused, and by the twentieth century it had become a massive obstacle to the scientific understanding of the place of con-

consciousness within the natural world" (Searle, 1992, p. 85). But the obstacle can be removed, he believes. After all, we are no longer committed to many of the Cartesian characteristics of the physical world. Once we acknowledge that, we are sure to realize that the „mental" and the „physical" are not necessarily mutually exclusive oppositions. Indeed, failing to manifest the appearance/reality distinction, he echoes Nagel's argument, does create an unbridgeable gap between conscious and non-conscious phenomena. Yet for Searle that only shows that our world, our natural world, consists of more than one sort of facts – it consist of both the objective and the subjective phenomena. Consequently, consciousness is part of the subject matter of science, albeit being irreducible to neuro-physiological processes.

Much as I can see the point in reshuffling our Cartesian categories, Searle's suggestion, I suspect, leaves those categories pretty much intact. It is not a new geography of the mind-body distinction that Searle introduces, but the very old one. Only now we have it *within* the physical domain. And this (sort of) naturalistic dualism cannot escape typical difficulties, in particular it offers no sufficient explanation for the causal interaction between the subjective and the objective. Given that all behavioral effects of conscious states must have complete neuro-physiological causes as well, we have a good reason for identifying conscious states with neuro-physiological ones. Admitting causal over-determination of behavioral states is clearly the worse explanation of the two. Thus, by perpetuating the gap between the subjective and the objective, Searle's suggestion fails to give a satisfying answer to the problem of consciousness.

In the short time that is left I would like to propose a different way of demystifying consciousness, again by challenging our Cartesian heritage. Searle was right, I believe, in tracing the origins of the problem back to the seventeenth century. Our natural world, up till then populated with qualities such as colors, smells, etc., underwent a significant change when scholasticism gave place to a new ethos in philosophy and science. Captured by the idea that the book of nature is written in a mathematical code and following a mechanical order, Descartes and his contemporaries kept away from the scientific domain all that could not be expressed mathematically or explained mechanically. To that we should add the renewing popularity of scepticism with regard to the senses, and we can see why the relative, subjective, sensible qualities had to be excluded from the absolute, objective, mathematical nature. Thanks to Descartes and his new way of classifying mental phenomena, they were not eliminated altogether. Taken away from the realm of the body, sensory qualities could then be relocated within the new boundaries of the Mind. However, that which had solved the problem for the substance dualists of the seventeenth century, created one for the non-dualists of the twentieth century – sensory qualities had to be fitted once again into the natural world. Yet once the Cartesian way of characterizing the mental and the physical was adopted, sensory qualities could not be admitted once again into the natural world – Dennett's eliminativist approach seems to be the only alternative opened to materialists. Searle's analysis of the problem was, therefore, correct. The

fault indeed lies with our Cartesian conception of the mind-body distinction. His only failure was to provide good enough reasons for rejecting that conception.

My suggestion, and here is where I part company with Searle, is to question the very mapping of the Mind-Body distinction. Descartes' criterion for distinguishing the mental from the non-mental phenomena was basically an epistemic one — a thing is mental if and only if we cannot doubt its existence and nature. Evidently, whenever there is no difference between appearance and reality, as in the case of conscious states, appearance cannot be misleading. Thus, all and only our conscious states were included in the mental domain. That is how sensations got to be part of our mind together with our beliefs and desires; a somewhat revolutionary conclusion, about which not even Descartes was absolutely decisive, as his later remarks on the dependence of sensations on bodily states may indicate. Be that as it may, the epistemic evidence upon which this criterion of demarcation is based has, in fact, no interesting metaphysical implications. Obviously enough, immediate accessibility to consciousness does not mark all our beliefs, desires and sensations. Any of us can go wrong with regard to his non-conscious beliefs or past sensations. Had we really used the epistemic criterion for sorting out mental phenomena from all the rest, we would have ended up with a much narrower domain than what is actually acknowledged. Moreover, since I have no immediate access to my past sensations, it follows that on a strict application of the epistemic criterion these sensations would have been classified as non-mental phenomena. It turns out that one and the same event may be classified at one time as a subjective, mental phenomenon, and on another time as an objective, non-mental phenomenon. Yet even if *esse est percipi* means no more than being *potentially* conscious, I'm still unsure whether it necessarily implies a significant metaphysical distinction. After all, realizing certain accessibility relations is not sufficient for being grouped as *sui generis*. I may have privileged access to the things that are locked inside my drawer. Shall we, then, draw a metaphysical line between these and all other things to which I have different sort of access? Certainly not! Likewise, having privileged access to some of our internal states is not enough for classifying them all under the same metaphysical category. There has to be some other reason for such a categorization. Still the only other criterion of demarcation — the criterion of intentionality — arguably does not site sensory qualities among mental phenomena. Similarly, properties which are distinctive of mentality — such as purposive behavior, freedom of the will, the creativity and adaptivity of our intellectual capacities — none of these are associated with the qualitative aspects of sensations. So if we do wish to draw a line between the mental and the non-mental phenomena, sensory qualities won't necessarily fall within the purview of the mental domain.

How is this related to the problem of consciousness? Well, according to Nagel, the objective sciences cannot account for the subjective, qualitative aspects of sensations. Nagel, however, like many Cartesians before him, is giving too much weight to the manner in which something is accessible to our consciousness. The ultimate objective of sci-

entific explanation is to be as accurate as possible. Thus, when the subjective points of view stand in our way to achieve that, we are well advised to ignore them. It doesn't follow, nevertheless, that the subjective point of view should *always* be ignored. If it provides us with an accurate account of the way things are, then it should be as legitimate as any other scientific method, its perspectival limitations notwithstanding. To be sure, the appearance/ reality distinction doesn't hold for facts that are immediately accessible to our consciousness, but that again is a metaphysically insignificant characteristic of these facts. At most it implies that we have immediate access to some of the primary qualities in nature – since sensory qualities cease to be secondary qualities when related to our internal states – while in regard to other primary qualities we have to settle with only indirect access. No unbridgeable gap separates the latter from the former, and in case we had good enough reasons for identifying sensory qualities with specific neuro-physiological states, nothing in principle would prevent us from accepting it. Such a reductive explanation might not enlighten us as to what it is like to undergo certain human sensations, but that we already know. It would, however, answer the above mentioned problem of causal over-determination, and it ought to explain the particular relations obtaining between sensory qualities. The challenge of explaining the qualitative aspects of sensations is, therefore, as demanding as any other explanatory challenge. It was only the Cartesian hold over our metaphysical conceptions that led Nagel and others to see a problem where there is none.

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