

Reflections on the Problem of Consciousness

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Reflections on the Problem of Consciousness

by

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PREFACE

The relation between body and mind has presented philosophy with its perennial problem. It exercised the minds of Plato and Aristotle and it was implicit in the thought, if not always present to the minds, of the Presocratics. In modern philosophy it became explicit in Descartes's *Meditations* and remained central to the deliberations of every subsequent philosopher of any significance from Hobbes to Hume, from Spinoza to Hegel, and from Husserl and Heidegger to Russell and Whitehead.

From whatever angle one approaches philosophy one cannot avoid this problem. Moral philosophy, both ethical and political, compels one to adopt some conception of human nature, its origins and status within the world, for one cannot decide on the best way to live without considering the impact of natural influences on the human condition and of human behaviour on nature including other humans; and these considerations at once raise the question of the relation of the human mind to Nature and the natural body it enlightens. A philosophy of Nature must include the place of humanity in the natural scheme, not only the human body, but also the knowing mind. Metaphysics cannot be divorced from Epistemology nor can that neglect the part played in the acquisition of knowledge by the bodily senses. And clearly a philosophy of mind must include some vision of the relation of the mind to the body it inhabits.

The problem has been central to my own thinking throughout my philosophical career and has figured in almost everything I have written. The solution I have reached is not new and I claim for it no originality; it is derived from Aristotle, Spinoza, Hegel and Collingwood, and my reading of Bradley and Samuel Alexander have contributed to it. I know of none that is better founded. But I can claim that it has been sorely neglected and universally overlooked by contemporary writers, whether from ignorance or from deliberate oversight; and I have felt the necessity repeatedly to remind them of it.

The long period during which the philosophical scene has been dominated by Analytic Philosophy, which has abjured metaphysics and what I am inclined to call genuine philosophy, especially its history, has probably engendered in younger writers a disinclination to consult past speculation, or to discuss its merits. They seem also determined to ignore the writings of anybody who does.¹

Those who write about the mind today do so mostly from a psychological viewpoint and are for the most part cognitive scientists. Their avowed aim is to arrive at what they consider to be a “scientific” theory, ignoring the transformation that the twentieth century revolution in physical science has effected in the meaning of that word. What was “scientific” before Einstein and Max Planck was expressly materialistic and atomistic. In regarding what it considered “objective” the “scientific outlook” of the nineteenth century excluded the observer and everything subjective. What is scientific today has to be viewed in a very different light. Einstein established the interdependence of all physical measurements with the consequent inseparability of physical concepts: space and time, energy and matter. He laid the foundation of a unified field theory, which, after several vicissitudes, has recently become prominent in physical research, giving promise of success and enlightenment. Contemporary physicists have discovered the indivisible interdependence of quantum events (basic to all others) and the consequent indissoluble unity of the entire physical world. Further, both Relativity and Quantum theories have united observer and observed in a way that promises a reconciliation of materialism with idealism. At the same time, while micro-biology has penetrated to the minutest details of living processes, an organismic approach in biology has become ever more important; and the science of ecology has established the interlaced holism of the biosphere. What is “scientific” today is the very opposite of materialism and atomism, and any philosophical doctrine that seeks to be scientific should be aware of this new outlook. A fresh approach to philosophical questions is now called for, quite different from that adopted by those who have been seduced by materialism, are enamoured of reductionism,² and obsessed (especially in connection with the mind-body problem) by neo-Darwinism.

In what follows I have sought evidence from current neuro-physiological research for the view of body-mind relation that I have advocated elsewhere and have tried to reformulate below. The genuine scientists, the neuro-biologists and physiologists have, in my opinion, adopted a much more sensible attitude towards the mind and its relation to the brain than have the self-styled conceptual scientists, who are really crypto-metaphysicians espousing a materialistic metaphysic that science no longer supports. My central appeal to the reader is to acknowledge duly his or her own immediate experience and not either to pretend at the behest of contemporary materialists that it does not exist or to forget its undeniable occurrence which renders any attempt at denial blatantly self-refuting.

The writings of scholars like Daniel Dennett and Antonio Damasio have caused me to reflect afresh on the nature of consciousness and have aroused anew the puzzlement concerning the functioning of the brain, which is obviously essential to consciousness, yet has in itself not the least indication of anything in common with our psychical experience. What has impressed me most has been the extent to which the discoveries of the neuro-physiologists have supported and confirmed the views of the philosophers of the past which I have hitherto found most convincing.

I am not a scientist and make no pretence at scientific competence. I have simply accepted on their authority what scientists have written and I have tried to think out its philosophical implications. I have always believed in the continuity of science and philosophy, and always recognizing the right (and duty) of the epistemologist to examine and if necessary criticize scientific method and presuppositions, I have remained convinced that philosophers cannot afford to ignore scientific discoveries and may not reject facts well supported by empirical evidence.

At an advanced age, living in retirement in a rural area, remote from academic libraries, I cannot embark upon a full-scale study of the subject of consciousness taking into account all available relevant scientific and philosophical publications. I have set out only to record my own reflections on the material that has come readily into my hands. I have made no attempt to explore the fields of the relevant sciences with any degree of comprehensiveness. Artificial Intelligence and the various speculations and debates about it I have dismissed as incapable of throwing any light upon what I have called the crucial problem, because the neuro-physiologists have firmly established that the brain does not function like a computer, and the only consciousness relevant to computation is that of the information engineer who works with the machine. Moreover, Roger Penrose has argued (and in my opinion) convincingly that no computer, capable as it is only of operating some algorithm, can produce the insight that is essential to mathematical thinking (and to any decision as to what algorithm is applicable or appropriate). Evolutionary biology, also, does not appear to me to enlighten us in any way about how the electro-chemical action of brain cells can generate conscious experience. How the human brain has evolved and how particular conscious activities may have been advantageous to survival are questions of importance and of great interest, but they are beside the main point that I am concerned with in these reflections.

I have merely pursued the ideas suggested to me by the authors I have read, seeking such enlightenment as they might provide. I have rejected and tried to reveal the defects of suggestions that obviously conflict with patent facts, and arguments which pre-suppose what they are intended to deny. My object has been more to find illumination of the obscurities that have troubled my own mind than to persuade others of the value of my own opinions. Nevertheless, I can but hope that what I have written may be of some help to those who read it in elucidating what has hitherto seemed unintelligible and to some even unfathomably mysterious.

Errol E. Harris
High Wray,
October 18th., 2005

NOTES

- 1 The contemporary critique and rejection of metaphysics I have discussed at some length in the Introduction to my book, *The Reality of Time*. As I indicated there not all Analytic philosophers nowadays reject metaphysics outright. Some have acknowledged the legitimacy of what they call “revisionary” and “descriptive” metaphysics, and others address problems that are essentially metaphysical, although they frequently overlook the latent metaphysical positions which they themselves tacitly presuppose.
- 2 What I mean by “reductionism” is analysis based on the assumption that the molecular parts of a systematic whole can, regarded as a mere collection, explain the specific nature of the whole, which is generally and more probably only to be found in the over-all structure

and co-operative combination of such parts. The analysis and examination of molecular structures, especially of brain functioning, is not only legitimate but essential to understanding how the brain operates; but it does not, of itself, explain how brain functioning, *qua* electrochemical activity, produces subjective experience.