

AN IDEAL SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract: This paper distinguishes three conceptual problems that attend philosophical accounts of consciousness. The first concerns the problem of properly characterizing the nature of consciousness itself, the second is the problem of making intelligible the relation between consciousness and the ‘physical’, and the third is the problem of creating the intellectual space for a shift in philosophical framework that would enable us to deal adequately with the first two problems. It is claimed that physicalism, in both its reductive and non-reductive forms, fails to deal adequately with either the first or second problem. The diagnosis of this failure is connected to the fact that consciousness cannot be treated in its own terms while being simultaneously fitted into an object-based conceptual schema. In light of this, it is proposed that a Bradleian version of absolute idealism may provide a metaphysical and epistemological framework which would enable us to recognize the conceptual diversity required to treat conscious phenomena on their own terms without forcing us to abandon naturalism.

Nobody has the slightest idea how anything material could be conscious.
Nobody even knows what it would be like to have the slightest idea about
how anything material could be conscious.
So much for the philosophy of consciousness.

Jerry Fodor (1992)

I: Introduction: The Problems

There are at least two conceptual problems of consciousness, both of which concern the very intelligibility of the phenomenon.¹ One concerns the correct way by which to characterize the nature of consciousness itself — let us call this the ‘phenomenology problem’ or problem^P. It is a problem that has remained largely unaddressed by the Anglo-American tradition. When it has been confronted, by philosophers like Dennett, the end result has not been very satisfactory (cf. Hutto, 1995b). However, coming to terms with problem^P is not the focus of this paper. The second problem, call it the ‘metaphysical problem’ or problem^M, has had many different expressions but essentially it concerns the difficulty we have in providing an intelligible representation of the relation between the mental and the physical. The opening quotation from Fodor nicely captures the character of the difficulty and the spirit of hopelessness that generally pervades much of the intellectual community with respect to it (cf. also Nagel, 1994, p. 65; Goguen & Forman, 1994, p. 5). Those who perceive there to be such a problem suggest that although it may be possible to chart the various relations between the mental and the material, by discovering ‘brute correlations’, there has been no headway (some say there can never be) with respect to our understanding of how the two are generally related in a transparent fashion.

¹ Another problem, which has been identified recently by David Chalmers and dubbed ‘the hard problem’, concerns explanation. Thus he characterizes it by focusing on the question: ‘Why should there be conscious experience at all?’ (Chalmers, 1996, p. 4).

My claim is that problem^M is not a problem to be solved, but one to be avoided. By its very formulation it is linked to traditional materialist/physicalist conceptions of basic ontology, although the problem appears in different ways for reductive and non-reductive materialists and physicalists. These are outlined in section II which forms a basis for the diagnosis given in section III. However, the cure on offer in the final section is not a return to any form of ontological dualism but a more tolerant naturalism provided by a version of absolute idealism.

II: What's the Matter with Materialism?

Reductionist solutions to problem^M have proved generally unconvincing because they fail to do justice to problem^P. Non-reductionist accounts are *prima facie* more plausible, since they do allow that conscious phenomena are real and irreducible features of the world, despite their claim that everything is ultimately physical. But on closer inspection they also fall down, because they either compromise the reality of the mental or else bend the notion of the physical out of all recognition. I will briefly discuss some familiar illustrative cases from both camps in order to highlight these difficulties.

Reductive materialist accounts

The most straightforward reductionist tactic is simply to identify certain physical events, states or processes with consciousness. The solution to problem^M then appears to be co-extensive with solutions to Chalmers' 'easy problems'. This has been Paul Churchland's policy. For example, he is content to tell us that 'being a middle-A sound is identical with being an oscillation in air pressure at 440 hertz; being red is identical with having a certain triplet of electromagnetic reflectance efficiencies; being warm is identical with a certain mean level of microscopically embodied energies, and so forth' (Churchland, 1989, p. 53). He claims that we mistakenly believe there is a problem concerning consciousness because we fail to recognize that 'our mechanisms of sensory discrimination . . . opaquely discriminate' (p. 30). Once we remove this confusion there is no reason not to accept that various conscious phenomena are nothing but physical events (states, processes) 'seen through a glass darkly'. That is to say, we often overlook the fact that we do not immediately recognize the true nature of things — this is true with respect to both perception and introspection.² Hence, there is no reason why it should be transparent to introspection that a particular quale, such as feeling a searing pain, is in fact nothing other than a particular spiking frequency of, say, 60 hertz (cf. Churchland, 1989, pp. 30–1).

Clearly, however, such statements of putative identity, in isolation, do not deal adequately with problem^M of consciousness. For that problem does not stem from our simple unwillingness to accept that what we call conscious experiences are really nothing other than physical phenomena 'opaquely discriminated'. We can see that this is not adequate by concentrating on Churchland's very admission that we have conscious '*modes and media of representation*' (p. 63). By admitting that our 'introspected' conscious experience is mere appearance and not reality he leaves important questions unanswered about the reality and nature of such

² I am not happy with talk of 'introspection' (cf. Hutto, 1995b, p. 466). I use the term here since many of the authors discussed use it.

appearances.³ In this way, he re-enforces puzzles concerning the subjective nature of the phenomena — such as: Why do conscious states feel as they do?, Who's doing the feeling?, and How is this managed? Since Churchland does not seriously address problem^P he has no answers to these kinds of worry. And such questions are all we need to generate problem^M.

Some reductionists, however, have given attention to problem^P so as to get our thinking about consciousness into shape to enable reduction. In *Consciousness Explained*, Daniel Dennett attempted to get us to re-conceive our everyday, but philosophically loaded, 'picture' of the nature of consciousness (which he claims derives from Descartes). In return, he offers us a new metaphor for consciousness: the multiple drafts model of consciousness (cf. Dennett, 1991, p. 455). According to his view consciousness is effectively 'reduced' to nothing more than our ability to generate a coherent 'text' concerning our inner mental life. He tells us that what is described in such 'texts' need not be granted any status at the ontological level. Thus, if we accept the reduction of consciousness to our capacity to make reports concerning 'conscious events' (Dennett's solution to problem^P) then problem^M simply becomes one of explaining how 'the brain' is able to make such 'reports'. The essential idea is to re-configure our understanding of consciousness so that it becomes more digestible to the methods of reductive materialism (cf. Hutto, 1995b, pp. 469–70). For all his ingenuity, many have doubted the success of the first stage of Dennett's attempted reduction of consciousness to 'heterophenomenological' reporting. This is not only because it fails to do justice to qualitative, non-verbal conscious phenomena, but also because it puts non-linguistic beings into a problematic position with respect to the accolade of 'being conscious' (cf. Hutto, 1995b, pp. 471–2).

Non-reductionist materialist accounts

Not all materialists/physicalists fail to do justice to the phenomenon of consciousness, or — more precisely — not all of them rule out the possibility of treating consciousness in its own terms. Such materialists endorse non-reductionism. Nonetheless this strategy, although increasingly popular, is unable to deal successfully with problem^M because, in making room for consciousness, it fails to provide a coherent account of the physical.

For example, John Searle is quite optimistic about being a faithful physicalist whilst giving consciousness its due. In fact, as Kim sarcastically notes, Searle claims that there is a 'simple solution' to the mind/body problem which has been staring us in the face for some time (cf. Searle, 1992, p. 1; Kim, 1995, p. 189). The simple solution is one that Searle has been proposing for a number of years: the view that conscious processes 'are as much a part of our natural history as digestion, mitosis, meiosis or enzyme secretion' (Searle, 1992, p. 1, cf. Searle, 1984, p. 25). In fact, he tells us, consciousness is 'a biological feature of certain organisms in exactly the same sense of "biological" . . .' as the above named processes. He allies himself with the non-reductive physicalist camp by saying things like 'one can accept . . . that the world consists entirely of physical particles in fields of force — without denying that among the physical features of the world are biological phenomena such as inner

³ Bradley made this point succinctly, long ago. He wrote 'For nothing is actually removed from existence by being labelled "appearance". What appears is there, and must be dealt with; but materialism has no rational way of dealing with appearance.' (Bradley, 1930, p. 12.)

qualitative states of consciousness . . .’ (Searle, 1992, p. xii). But by continuing to use the language of ‘physicalism’ in this way he invites confusion.

Thus we might legitimately wonder how and why our psychological states manage to be conscious merely in virtue of their cerebral locale and biological nature. But these are questions to which Searle provides no detailed answers from within the biological domain. Instead, he consistently relies on the general idea that mental phenomena are ‘caused by and realized in’ the brain (cf. Searle, 1984, pp. 21–3).⁴ The claim is that there are micro and macro levels in nature and that causation operates between and across these levels. To use his own example, liquidity is causally produced by the behaviour of H₂O molecules and it interacts causally with other macro-sized things in its surround in virtue of its micro-structure.

But orthodox physicalists, such as J. Kim, are rightly sceptical about the notion of causation which operates in this account (cf. Kim, 1995, pp. 193–4). For example, Kim claims that Searle’s horizontal-causation sponsors a confused kind of over-determination and that his vertical causation does not allow for the time gaps that are required for causal mechanisms to operate. In response, Searle has emphasised that his notion of ‘causation’ is not the old-style Humean sort, as there are no mechanisms in the microstructure which account for the supervenient features. Nor is there a time gap. (Cf. Searle, 1995.) There is nothing wrong with such a reply, but it does raise the question: How can one marry such an unorthodox account of causation with physicalism as standardly conceived? Or more pointedly: Why would one wish to? For this reason, it isn’t clear what *kind* of physicalism Searle is espousing, in much the same way that it isn’t clear what he understands as the defining limits of ‘biology’. At the very least, Searle owes us a clear statement of the kind of physicalism he endorses. Perhaps his physicalism comes to nothing more than an endorsement of the claim that ‘if we are going to call anything that is made up of physical particles physical; then, trivially, everything in the world is physical’ (Searle, 1992, p. 26). But if this is the case then it isn’t clear how he can rest easy with the idea that ‘everything is ultimately just physical’, given the rest of his claims about the reality of subjective, qualitative phenomena. Searle is correct to think that the main difficulty with respect to the mind/body problem lies with the standard metaphysical assumptions we make; however, his own account does not show us how to get free of such assumptions.⁵

Owen Flanagan also tells us, ‘The wise naturalist is not a reductionist’ (Flanagan, 1993, p. 92), but he is more aware of the difficulties in this position. To avoid them he proposes a distinction between what he calls ‘linguistic physicalism’ and ‘metaphysical physicalism’, and suggests that non-reductive naturalists ought only to endorse the latter. He describes these categories in the following fashion:

Metaphysical physicalism simply asserts that what there is, and all there is, is physical stuff and its relations. Linguistic physicalism is the thesis that everything physical can be expressed or captured in the languages of the basic sciences. (Flanagan, 1993, p. 98.)

But this makes his brand of non-reductive naturalism quite bizarre because, in endorsing it, one *literally* does not know what it means to be a ‘physicalist’. ‘Physical’ is robbed of any possible meaning as there are no principled boundaries,

⁴ This view he now espouses as the doctrine of causal supervenience (Searle, 1992, pp. 125–6).

⁵ For example, he writes ‘. . . what I really mean is consciousness *qua* consciousness, *qua* mental, *qua* subjective, *qua* qualitative is *physical*, and physical *because* mental. All of which shows, I believe, the inadequacy of the traditional vocabulary.’ (Searle, 1992, p. 15.)

such as those established by the reductionists, by which to decide which phenomena are genuine and hence ought to be regarded as properly ‘physical’.

Colin McGinn is another nonreductive physicalist who vacillates in his understanding of the physical. In places, he takes a conservative, hard-nosed line on how to understand it. For instance, he rules out the possibility of a constructive, scientific account of consciousness from the start by insisting that the ‘relations’ traditionally relied on to do the work, be they causal or teleofunctional, are only as natural as the kinds they relate (McGinn, 1991, p. 49–58). His reasoning is that, as consciousness is essentially ‘non-natural’ in character,⁶ there can be no real possibility of a scientific account of it in traditional terms. Attempts to provide such an account overlook the fact that the very topic-neutrality of terms like ‘causation’, ‘relation’, and ‘identity’ make it look as if we could naturalise consciousness, but also guarantee that we cannot. This is because, as such terms are topic-neutral they can be used both ‘naturally’ and ‘non-naturally’ (cf. pp. 57–8). Therefore if one claims to naturalize consciousness by finding a causal role for it, McGinn will claim one has only linked an unnatural kind, conscious experience, with a natural kind, physical behaviour.

Despite this, he ironically proposes a much more modest form of naturalism which maintains that consciousness is a perfectly legitimate ‘natural’ phenomena even though we are ‘cognitively closed’ to an understanding how it could be so (p. 47). The reason we are ‘cognitively closed’ in this regard is because our top-down attempts to understand the link between consciousness and the brain are impeded by the limits of introspection. In other words, there is nothing from within our introspective awareness that gives us any means of intelligibly connecting consciousness with the neurophysical processes that underwrite it. Bottom-up approaches are similarly limited by the perception-based methods we must employ in neuroscience — they are unable to ‘reach’ the arena of conscious experience.

He appeals to the idea that there is a hidden structure to consciousness, which explains the psychophysical link, but which cannot be characterized as being either material or mental. He is led to suggest that this hidden structure of consciousness may ‘exhibit both [the mental and the material] as aspects of a deeper reality’ (p. 82). If he is correct, we will never be able to make the relation between consciousness and its material substrate ‘perfectly intelligible’. In order to support his aspectualism he is led to postulate a noumenal reality which he identifies with the natural.

Ignoring some of the contentious details of McGinn’s views on perception-based epistemology, I have some sympathy with his position. However, it is hobbled by its allegiance to physicalism. For despite telling us the noumenal is natural, he also tells us that ‘Naturalism in the philosophy of mind is the thesis that every property of mind can be explained in broadly physical terms’ (p. 23). Given this, we wind up with the idea that the noumenal, the natural and the physical are all one and the same. In order to understand how he hopes to pull these, *prima facie*, incompatible views together we must consider the passage in which he tells us that ‘cognitive closure with respect to P [the property that explains the nature of the psychophysical link] does not imply irrationalism about P. That P is (as we might say) *noumenal* for M [our type of mind] does not show that P does not occur in some naturalistic scientific theory T . . .’ (p. 4). Putting

⁶ He does not seem to realise that he literally contradicts this position when he later claims that under his account consciousness is, in fact, a natural phenomenon. What he really means by the claim of ‘non-naturalism’ above is that consciousness will not reduce to the material (or physical).

this together we get the result that some physical theory does explain the nature of the psychophysical nexus but that the link theory is forever cognitively closed to us. This is why McGinn is a ‘non-constructive naturalist’ who sees the mind–body relation as epistemically, but not metaphysically, problematic. Despite other disagreements,⁷ McGinn winds up using the same tools as Flanagan to make sense of his brand of naturalism. He distinguishes between *effective* and *existential* naturalism, which firmly resembles the distinction between linguistic and metaphysical physicalism. Effective naturalism concerns our ability to ‘construct naturalistic accounts of every phenomena’, while existential naturalism is just a metaphysical thesis that ‘nothing that happens in nature is inherently anomalous’ (cf. McGinn, 1991, p. 87).

Once again, this all-too-convenient distinction between the epistemic and the metaphysical makes metaphysical physicalism (or existential naturalism) unintelligible. Hence, McGinn’s staunch faith in the truth of ‘physicalism’ appears unwarranted. For what supports the idea that there exists a physical theory, that is, in principle, beyond our grasp, which explains the facts of psychophysical connection?⁸ One can’t help but wonder what could justify such a view in light of the rest of McGinn’s argument. The answer, which he gives himself, is that nothing justifies the view. Rather it must be accepted as an ‘article of metaphysical faith’ (p. 87). On this point I am content to be a heretic.

In all of these cases it is clear that problem^M only presents itself against certain background assumptions about what counts as ‘natural’ and a certain, entrenched view of metaphysics sponsored by the idea that ‘the physical’ (in one form or another) describes the ultimately real. I offer a diagnosis of this tension in the next section and an alternative proposal in the final one.

III: The Limits of Conceptual Schema

The source of the special problems concerning consciousness can best be understood if we attend to reductionism, the kind of physicalism which aims to understand one set of phenomena in the terms of, or in harmony with, another (usually a more basic) set. With consciousness, the reductionist hopes to show that it can be fully understood by appeal to theories which are *already* recognized by the basic sciences. The classical statement of the unity of science can be found in Oppenheim and Putnam’s (1958) paper of the same name. Advanced in the form of an empirical hypothesis, the claim was that it is *credible* to believe that all higher-order sciences might micro-reduce to a more basic science (i.e. microphysics) by means of bridge laws.⁹ Thus:

Given two theories T_1 and T_2 , T_2 is said to be reduced to T_1 if and only if:

- (1) The vocabulary of T_2 contains terms not in the vocabulary of T_1 .
- (2) Any observational data explainable by T_2 are explainable by T_1 .
- (3) T_1 is at least as well systemized as T_2 .

(Oppenheim & Putnam, 1958, p. 5)

⁷ Flanagan criticises McGinn for proposing an either/or approach to consciousness from above or below. Instead, he hopes to approach in both directions at the same time through his ‘natural method’.

⁸ We are told ‘we know there are such facts, but we cannot actually identify them, even in principle’ (McGinn, 1991, p. 88).

⁹ Or as Churchland calls them, correspondence rules (cf. Churchland, 1989, p. 47).

Today we are told that ‘the classical account of intertheoretic reduction . . . now appears to be importantly mistaken’ (Churchland, 1989, p. 47). Contemporary reductionists such as Paul Churchland claim that reduction ought not be thought of as the strict logical deduction of the terms of one theory to those of another, but rather that the ‘image of the higher order theory’, or more specifically its explanatory and predictive resources, will be preserved in lower level theory (p. 49). Other contemporary reductionists would regard even this softer version of reduction as being too quasi-Nagelian (cf. Smith, 1992, pp. 28–9, pp. 33–5). But although there have been serious difficulties in unifying the special sciences, and there are those who doubt the general project is well-motivated or even possible, it is important to note in what ways the case of consciousness is special. Putting aside other considerations, I want to suggest that consciousness has resisted naturalistic reduction in its own unique way and analyse why this is so.

What makes consciousness different?

In his article ‘Why is consciousness puzzling?’, Peter Bieri attempts to isolate the source of the trouble. In discussing the relation of wholes to parts, he makes the following important remark:

[W]hereas all other laws to which we get accustomed relate perfectly *objective* phenomena, we are here talking about the case where something *subjective* emerges from purely objective factors. . . . [T]here is an essential point we are not willing to give away: sensing or experiencing is something different and new relative to all other systematic properties. (Bieri, 1995, p. 52; italics in original.)

Bieri’s point is that there is a problem about intelligibility in the case of consciousness. This is the heart of the problem. For there to be a unity between the various special sciences there must be, at the very least, a common, shared schema which does not logically preclude the possibility of making their inter-relations intelligible.

We can see the unspoken need for a common schema if we consider the most successful cases of inter-theoretical reduction such as that of chemistry and physics (cf. Patricia Churchland, 1986, p. 279). There is no impossible conceptual jump between talk of atoms to talk of molecules, nor any great leap in thinking about the kinds of relation which hold between such entities. Even the more ‘modest’ accounts of a unified science draw upon examples in which the phenomena described by the reducing theory do not differ from that described by the theory to be reduced so radically as to cast doubt on the possibility of making the connections between them ‘intelligible’ (cf. Kirk, 1995, p. 392). The point is that if we think mainly of classical physical phenomena, on either a micro or macro scale, they share what I shall dub a common object-based schema. For example, whatever other differences may exist between them, geo-physical, economic, and biological events (and objects) all occupy relatively normal three-dimensional, spatio-temporal locations.¹⁰ With consciousness this is not so.

Trying to establish such locations is what leads directly to the problem of phenomenal space — finding a place for the world of experience within the world of physical space (McGinn, 1995, pp. 149–53). There are sound reasons to think that conscious-

¹⁰ There are other good reasons for doubting the logical possibility of unification, such as Davidsonian arguments about the normativity of propositional attitudes and similar arguments about the nature of teleological explanations in certain of the biological sciences.

ness should not be located distally — even inside a subject's body (cf. Dennett, 1991, pp. 129–31). But McGinn is right to note that when confronted with this fact there is a pervasive tendency amongst philosophers to try to locate the experiences in the 'brain' of the subject on the basis of causal considerations (McGinn, 1995, p. 151). But if we take experiences at face value, how can they be the kind of things which have a designated cerebral locale? Unless we simply presuppose the intelligibility of some form of identity theory we come face to face with problem^M and Churchland's unanswered questions all over again.

Consider also the debate between sense-data theorists and naive realists. They too have the difficulty of trying to locate 'what is perceived'. Is it an object in the mind or in the world, as inherent in the properties of the things seen. If we simply talk of consciousness as 'a mode of presentation to the subject' we become prone to equivocation of this kind. My suggestion is that we ought not treat consciousness as a kind of 'object' at all (cf. Hutto, 1995b, pp. 474–5). To avoid such intractable difficulties it is better to regard consciousness, not as what is experienced, but as the medium through which we experience.¹¹ The ordinary spatio-temporal world of objects is what is most often perceived by consciousness, but it is not co-extensive with consciousness itself (cf. Searle, 1992, p. 131). For this reason, it is not possible to give our experience of the colour red a location in the way we can locate our car keys or a pencil on our desks (McGinn, 1995, p. 150). To borrow McGinn's summary, 'In advance of theoretical reconstruction consciousness is not spatially well-behaved' (p. 153).

A parallel in physics

Consciousness is not alone in resisting incorporation in a classical object-based schema. A similar problem occurs when we consider the differences between classical and quantum physics. It is well known that the central equation of quantum mechanics (the Schrödinger equation) has thrown up serious puzzles about the very nature of the quantum 'domain' (cf. Maudlin, 1997, p. 14). In particular, its features are contrasted with those of the classical, macroscopic physical world.¹² As Folse points out, in quantum physics 'the observed properties of the system must be considered as *relational* rather than *possessed* (or 'inherent') properties' (Folse, 1996, p. 128). This is what gives the quantum physical domain 'a kind of wholeness which precludes attributing a classical mechanical state to the observed object as an isolated system . . .' (p. 130).

On the face of it, quantum mechanics resists understanding within the familiar classical categories we are accustomed to applying. Thus, treated on its own terms, not only does quantum mechanics paint a picture of a reality that is difficult to understand; it paints one which is hard to square with a 'realist' treatment of the classical physical world. The tensions which arise become obvious when we consider the 'wave-like' nature of the microphysical world alongside our more object-based accounts of 'reality'. Nor is this conflict trivial. For as Bohm notes:

From the fact that quantum theory agrees with experiment in so wide a domain . . . it is evident that the . . . features of quantum mechanics are in some way a reflection of the

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of this see Hutto (1998b; forthcoming).

¹² Bohm gives a very succinct and useful description of the background assumptions that set up the problem (Bohm, 1980, p. 66)

real behaviour of matter in the atomic and nuclear domains, but here the question arises as to just how to interpret [those domains] (Bohm, 1980, p. 67; cf. Chalmers, 1996, p. 337).

The difficulty in formulating an adequate ‘interpretation’ of quantum physics boils down to developing one that ‘can plausibly be defended as realistic’ (Cushing, quoted in Folse, 1996, p. 122).¹³ This is obviously a normative requirement and smuggles in notions about what would count as ‘plausibility’. Furthermore, it supposes that we have a satisfactory notion of ‘realism’ in place. Nevertheless, it is against this background that a number of interpretations of quantum physics have taken root (cf. Hutto, 1998a).

By way of recognition of the difficulty of finding a home for both consciousness and quantum physics within the familiar, spatio-temporal world, there have been a plethora of theories trying to establish a metaphysical link between these two strange types of phenomena. Thus, Chalmers observes:

The attractiveness of quantum theories of consciousness may stem from a Law of Mimimization of Mystery: consciousness is mysterious and quantum mechanics is mysterious, so maybe the two mysteries have a common source (Chalmers, 1995, p. 207).

I am sceptical about such theories of consciousness, but I do think there is a connection between these puzzling phenomena which can be deployed to alleviate the twin mysteries. For what makes both these phenomena peculiar is that neither fits easily within an object-based schema. In other words, neither sits happily in a conceptual schema that derives from our responses to a world of macro sized, spatio-temporal objects (however that is extended and developed by theoretical considerations).¹⁴ But rather than trying to find an explanatory link between them, we can use this fact as a grounds for the re-consideration of our standard of what counts as natural phenomena. It is instructive to remember in this regard that both problems^{P&M} are fostered by, and simultaneously their solutions hampered by, the metaphysical assumptions which make consciousness appear to be a rogue phenomenon.

IV: Pluralistic Naturalism

If we cannot solve problems^{P&M} by sponsoring reductive or non-reductive physicalism, because we cannot intelligibly find a home for consciousness within an object-based schema, but we are unwilling to deny its existence, then we must ask: What other metaphysical manoeuvres can we make?

Pluralism

One option is to take conscious phenomena at face value, treat them as inherently separate from the phenomena described by the classical physical sciences, and abandon any attempt to intelligibly bring these together. This would be to adopt a

¹³ Or, as Paul Davies puts it, ‘Nobody questions what the theory predicts, only what it means’ (Davies, 1989, p. 4)

¹⁴ It might be thought that talk of such incommensurable conceptual schemata ignores Davidson’s important lesson concerning radically different conceptual schemes, but it does not. Davidson’s point concerns the radical interpretation of an alien language of which we can make no sense; the point here concerns two (or more) different schemata of which we can make sense individually, but which we cannot make intelligible in terms of one another (cf. also Hutto, 1996).

very naive form of ‘tolerant pluralism’ or ‘pragmatism’.¹⁵ Pluralism asks us to respect the fact that the way in which we talk about various types of phenomena is revelatory of their nature. In this regard, pluralists would claim that it is right to contrast certain features of psychological phenomena with the features of spatially extended objects which have mass, weight, length, etc. This tolerant pluralist stance is worth considering, given that reductionism suffers an inherent inability to respect the seemingly autonomous character of conscious phenomena, while non-reductive materialism does respect it, but in so doing abuses our understanding of the physical. Against this background, pluralism seems at least desirable. However, the challenge for pluralists, who also wish to be naturalists, is that they must respond to Cussins’ question:

[W]hat is our right to ontological monism, to one world? If we operate with explanatory isolated discourse levels then we need to provide a justification for our claim that the distinct discourse levels refer to the same world. (Cussins, 1992, p. 191.)

In other words, if we insist that the phenomena of consciousness and the phenomena of physics, as described by the respective discourses, must be kept separate, are we not thereby also committed to some form of ontological dualism or pluralism? The point is that if one accepts a naive pluralism then one becomes a target for the question: how is it that all these independent phenomena can inter-relate and affect one another if they are ontologically separate? This question is particularly apposite, for there is a recognized connection between brain events and consciousness (cf. McGinn, 1991, p. 83–5). And there is, of course, an interaction between events in the quantum mechanical realm and the more classical physical realm, specifically for example the changes in the behaviour of electrons that affect the whole atom. But it isn’t possible to make these connections ‘intelligible’ within a single framework.

Given this, a better move is to endorse some form of aspectualism. Aspectualism is well supported by our everyday practices, for we always selectively direct our attention toward various aspects of situations, activities, processes, and/or states of affairs. For instance, I might only have eyes for economic facts; thus, if I can find no economic character or aspect to an event it may fail to interest me altogether. Likewise, I can be interested in the arrival of a plane as it involves ‘My reaching Heathrow late’ or as it concerns ‘My first moment in England’, just as I can be interested in a tree as the subject of a poem or the focus of a botanical study. These ordinary examples reveal how often we make reference to aspects in daily life. What we find interesting about an event will invariably depend upon which context we use when speaking about it (i.e. for which purpose the question was asked, who we are speaking with, etc.). We can ask many different, important, and explanatorily useful questions about ‘what is going on’, bearing in mind that no single response will explain all the facts about an event in a context-independent manner (Hutto, 1998c).

Prima facie this is what we are after but, as Cussins notes, we may wonder how appeal to ‘multiple aspects’ overcomes the difficulties generated by ‘naive pluralism’ unless some commitment is made to the existence of an underlying reality which

¹⁵ Such pluralism is described by Cussins in the following way: ‘[P]luralism is not discriminatory: it is neither scientific nor humanistic. Pluralism denies very little at the primary level of discourse: it does not reject a non-scientific level of discourse for being non-scientific; nor does it reject a non-person-based discourse level for being non-person-based. It rejects only those putative levels of discourse which are unable to maintain their internally established conditions of success.’ (Cussins, 1992, p. 184.)

connects the various aspects of the various phenomena. For it would seem that the very idea of multiple aspects requires there to be ‘something’ to which the aspects belong,¹⁶ and, as was noted in the critique of non-reductive physicalism, it will not do to describe such an underlying phenomenon in non-neutral (i.e. physicalist) terms.

Bradley’s idealism

It is here that I think a Bradleian form of absolute idealism may be of use. Absolute idealism is a metaphysical system which originates from Hegel and which pre-dates the logical (and material) reductionism inspired by the analytical philosophy of Russell, Moore and the early Wittgenstein. It was popular in turn-of-the-century England with thinkers such as Green, McTaggart and F.H. Bradley,¹⁷ and has other followers and forms in the continental tradition. Although it is clearly not possible to give a comprehensive account of Bradley’s absolute idealism in this paper, nor would I desire to defend all aspects of it, it is possible to give a broad and reasonably generic sketch of its core features. This is instructive because it is the general metaphysical system that is useful to those struggling with problem^M. Bearing this in mind, it is important to emphasise that in advocating a reconsideration of Bradley’s absolute idealism I am not arguing for the simple ‘resurrection’ of his particular version of it. Rather the claim is that, perhaps in some modified form, the general metaphysical system is better suited to deal with the problems of consciousness than any form of materialism.

According to the absolute idealists, the object of philosophical inquiry is complete unqualified truth, or — to put it in their language — philosophers are concerned with the Absolute Idea.¹⁸ Metaphysically speaking, Beiser has claimed, the Absolute Idea is equivalent to something like Spinoza’s conception of substance — that which can be conceived of independent of everything else. He goes on to claim that ‘only one thing can satisfy this definition: the universe as a whole’ (Beiser, 1993, p. 4). Hence, on this view, philosophy is concerned with nothing less than everything. One of the major aims of Hegel’s well-known version of absolute idealism was to explain, in one coherent system, how questing after the stated object of philosophy necessarily gave rise to the peculiar course of philosophy’s history. Crudely put, the explanation given is one based on an analysis of logic which reveals the limits of our thinking. On this account philosophical dialogue was presented as a particular kind of logical argument known as the dialectic.

Hegel’s own example of the progression of dialectical thinking is helpful in making the genesis of absolute idealism more transparent. Through consideration of the idea that ‘the universe is pure being’ one is led to the idea that pure being is, of need, absent of all particular qualities. To *be, simpliciter*, is therefore in fact to be nothing in particular. Hence, consideration of the idea of pure being leads naturally, in the course of thinking, to consideration of the nature of nothingness. But ironically,

¹⁶ Cussins even goes so far as to tell us that it is ‘a thoroughgoing naturalist [not the pluralist, who] takes every real phenomena to be a part of, or an aspect of, nature’ (Cussins, 1992, p. 187).

¹⁷ Hylton tells us, ‘Beginning with the publication of Stirling’s *The Secret of Hegel* in 1865, idealism gradually became the orthodox view among most active philosophers in Britain’ (Hylton, 1993, p. 448).

¹⁸ Put another way, the ‘purpose of philosophy [was] the rational knowledge of the absolute . . . [and] the absolute is that which does not depend on anything else in order to exist’ (Beiser, 1993, p. 4).

consideration of nothingness forces us to reconsider the idea of pure being, for how else are we to understand the claim that something is nothing? This chain of thinking brings us eventually to the category of becoming, which acts to unify and modify both earlier categories (cf. Forster, 1993, pp. 132–3; Hylton, 1990, pp. 94–5). According to Hegel's vision, the dialectical process of resolving such contradictions, which are due to the incompleteness in our thinking, will continue until we can achieve the Absolute Idea which would apply to ultimate reality.

In a different way, Bradley based his vision of the nature of reality, in his later work, on a handful of arguments concerning the essentially contradictory nature of traditional forms of metaphysics and their failure to produce a unified picture of reality (Bradley, 1930, ch. 2 & 3). His attack upon such metaphysical systems is an assessment of their ability to deliver the promised goods of sound first philosophy. In chapter XII of *Appearance and Reality* he makes a characteristic, summary remark: 'We have found, so far, that we have not be able to arrive at reality. The various ways, in which things have been taken up, have all failed to give more than mere appearance. Whatever we have tried has turned out something which, on investigation, has been proved to contradict itself' (p. 110).¹⁹ The main conclusion he draws is that we are limited by the finite nature of the kinds of statements we employ in our thinking. This applies equally to ordinary and scientific judgements. For instance, he maintains that the empirical sciences only deal with abstractions and hence partial truths, as contrasted to the metaphysical philosopher who seeks, but never completely obtains, absolute truth (McHenry, 1996, p. 166; Mander, 1994, pp. 21, 24; Hutto, 1998a).

Leslie Armour has put the point in this fashion: 'the final unity of the various "aspects" of reality is "unknown" ' (Armour, 1996, p. 127). On my reading, the more correct expression of this view is that 'reality' is simply unknowable. We cannot make judgements about, or selectively direct our attention at, the world as a whole — we can only form judgements by means of 'abstraction' and conceptualisation. Until we conceptually 'abstract' or 'delimit' from the whole, there can be no truth-laden judgements at all. It is not possible to talk of 'ultimate truths about reality' if reality cannot be captured, in its entirety, by any limited conceptual categories. In this light, *contra* Hegel, Bradley's metaphysics offers no positive assertions about the nature of reality (perhaps even his monism is an overstatement in this light).²⁰ We must remember that he is, in an important sense, a sceptical philosopher and part of his project was to introduce a healthy scepticism to the English mind.²¹

This simplistic sketch gives some indication why the absolute idealists held their most characteristic view concerning metaphysics, and how it is possible to maintain

¹⁹ In understanding this we must bear in mind Bradley's special views on the nature of contradiction. Mander points out that for Bradley 'two terms or statements are contradictory if they have nothing in common. The attempt to join two quite different things together with a mere "and" is just contradiction.' (Mander, 1994, p. 50, cf. p. 45.)

²⁰ In this I agree with Armour, when he writes: 'But what is finally to be said about this Absolute? That it is the one and only reality? Perhaps *nothing* can be said about it.' (Armour, 1996, p. 116.)

²¹ He writes: 'The chief need of English philosophy is, I think, a sceptical study of first principles' (Bradley, 1930, p. viii). As Mander notes 'For Bradley tensions are overcome by showing that they are not really in opposition at all — that is to say, by showing that the contradictions are all in our conceptions, and ultimate reality is wholly non-contradictory. Bradley was unable to accept Hegel's dictum of genuine and ineliminable contradictions at work within reality.' (Mander, 1994, p. 54.)

different versions of the basic doctrine. The essence of both versions can be summarised as follows: What the absolute idealists were arguing for was a particular kind of appearance–reality divide. The world of separate things, the world which we inhabit, is the world of appearance. It is only partial and incomplete — while the Absolute, the world as it really is, cannot be completely described using ordinary or scientific categories. In this they were believers in the ‘unreality of separateness’ (Russell, 1945, p. 731). The world appears to be made up of a plurality of things but ultimate reality is, in fact, a single whole. The fact that things appear to be separate makes the judgements of ordinary life and science (which are putatively about such separate things) merely conditional and limited. They are relative to particular contexts, hence they cannot be candidates for the timeless verities of philosophy. This is why any attempt to categorise ultimate reality in terms of our limited concepts will always generate paradoxes. For such statements are contradictory if taken out of their quotidian contexts; that is, if they are taken non-relatively as remarks about ultimate reality. Put otherwise, since philosophical truth is exclusively concerned with ultimate reality, we can see that ordinary judgements — which are partial abstractions — are, unsurprisingly, inadequate when issued in a philosophical or metaphysical setting. No ordinary statement manages to say anything complete because it is always contextual. The value in re-considering at least this aspect of absolute idealism is that it provides means for us to infer, or posit, the existence of single, unified reality that underlies our multifarious, but limited discourses and categories.

Realism and consciousness

To bring this all back to the question at hand, some philosophers may be unconvinced that there is a common reality which is of interest to, say, both the subject of consciousness and the neuroscientist. This is revealed by the fact that there is no *neutral* way in which to characterize such a reality. But, if we were to follow Bradley, the mistake made here is to quest for a neutral description. What would such a description be like? In order to provide it we would need to stand outside language and categories in order to get an uncluttered look at what was ‘going on’. Unless there were some God’s Eye View available to us, there would seem to be little sense in trying to talk neutrally about a reality which only reveals itself in part through its aspects. Thankfully, it is not necessary to defend the View from Nowhere in order to defend aspectual talk. To posit, or infer, the existence of an underlying reality is not to suggest that it can be independently ‘seen’, ‘conceptualised’ or ‘represented’. In this respect it is useful to remind ourselves of the kind of contexts wherein we are wont to speak of aspects. We do not do so dis-interestedly; thus, the phenomena in question will be initially picked out — not *neutrally* — but with reference to our particular projects (cf. Putnam, 1987, p. 20). For example, I first designate that I am interested in the car crash on Tuesday and then begin to give attention to the various aspects of the crash which may be of importance to me. Viewing matters in this light, we overcome the need to find some neutral ground upon which to stand when initially speaking of aspects. We are never free of a limited conceptual perspective.²² The very idea of an uncluttered perspective on reality is precisely what is denied by Bradleian idealism.

²² Like Putnam, we must accept that ‘There are “external facts”, and we can *say what they are*. What we *cannot* say — because it makes no sense — is what the facts are *independent of all conceptual choices*’ (Putnam, 1987, p. 33).

As long as we are interested (at least initially) in the things which happen in the world as it is accessible to us, talk about the various aspects of a particular phenomenon will be, as it were, pragmatically grounded. In accepting this claim we can also accept that by employing different explanatory schemes and discourses we can and do make reference to different aspects of a single, common world without implying that such a world can be properly or completely characterized by a uniform set of our ordinary terms and concepts (or by a concatenation of all true statements). For example, just as we know, to use a potentially treacherous phrase, that there are ‘causal connections’ between the quantum domain and the classical, macro-physical world, but are unable to give an intelligible explication of these ‘connections’, so too we know that conscious phenomena are systematically affected by physiological and neurological events but cannot make these relations intelligible either. When we address matters in this light, we avoid the dualist’s mistake of thinking that conscious and physical phenomena are metaphysically independent because conceptually independent, without making the materialist mistake of thinking they need be conceptually linked because metaphysically dependent.

Still, it may appear that there is an important tension in the account sketched above. For how can we accept on the one hand that our ordinary and scientific categories describe, and apply to, genuine phenomena while at the same time hold that ‘ultimate reality’ cannot be completely represented in ‘ordinary’ terms? The apparent tension here stems from a failure to recognize that the philosophical account of absolute idealism makes no attempt to interfere with, or cast aspersions upon, our ordinary judgements or practices — including the ordinary judgement and practice of coming to regard *this* or *that* phenomenon as being real or not. For example, in Bradley’s eyes the business of ordinary life and science is to do with describing, and charting the behaviour of, phenomena — but nothing more. So long as it remains metaphysically silent, he is inclined to regard such activity as ‘useful and is indeed quite necessary’ (Bradley, 1930, p. 109).²³

This view will not sit easily with those trained in the analytic philosophical tradition. In particular, it is likely to raise the hackles of those philosophers who feel the need to maintain so-called ‘scientific credibility’ by reminding us that all genuine phenomena are ultimately physical. But, in response, it must be remembered that it was not natural science that provided the transparent metaphysical standard which traditional physicalists have insisted upon as the measure for all good scientific theorising. That vision was developed under the auspices of the analytical approach

²³ A number of authors have made this point. Mander puts it this way:

The picture is like this. Reality is a unique and all-encompassing whole, but there are many different limited points of view that we may take of it. Each of these viewpoints abstracts from the whole its own special world, setting it up as independent and self-subsistent reality. Although theoretically false, in practical terms this is quite legitimate and essential. (Mander, 1991, p. 74.)

Hylton notes:

From Hegel’s perspective, it would be missing the point of his work to say that such-and-such a claim of his conflicts with such-and-such a well-established and widely believed claim of commonsense, or natural science. It is not that Hegel would simply say: so much the worse for commonsense (or science). Rather, his attitude would surely be that while the claims of commonsense or natural science may be valid and correct within their sphere, their sphere is limited. (Hylton, 1993, p. 468, cf. also, Hylton, 1991, p. 11.)

to philosophy itself, which developed, in part, as a reaction to absolute idealism. The debate therefore cannot be settled by a simple appeal to physicalist criteria of what counts as ‘proper science’, since this is in part what is being called into question (cf. Hutto, 1998a). An historical investigation into the origins of analytic philosophy is a useful heuristic in getting us to see that our basic assumptions, in particular those concerning the status of ordinary and scientific judgements, are not philosophically neutral (cf. Hylton, 1990).²⁴ Nor are they necessarily well-grounded, if ‘grounded’ at all.

V: Conclusion: A New Naturalism?

Nagel often claims that unless our current science undergoes a revolution of Kuhnian proportions there will be no hope in solving the problem of consciousness (cf. Nagel, 1994). But he is wrong to think that we need a ‘scientific revolution’ in order to solve problem^M. Nor, as Dennett supposes, is the conclusion to be drawn that we should be dissatisfied with our ordinary understanding of consciousness and seek to replace it with a more streamlined theory better suited to reduction. There is another way out. We can re-consider the metaphysical and philosophical assumptions that generate the problems about consciousness.

I claim that some form of Bradleian absolute idealism, perhaps a substantially modified one, may provide us with a ‘sound’ philosophical framework which is both pluralistic and naturalistic at the same time (unlike the confused versions of non-reductive physicalism). Furthermore, I claim that the outright rejection of absolute idealism on the grounds that it is unfriendly to both ‘commonsense and natural science’ is a straightforward misreading of the doctrine. A proper case would need to be made in order to establish either of these points.

In conclusion, I have not attempted to solve the problem^M in traditional terms, nor do I think this can be done. Hence the tactic outlined in this paper may look like a cheat. But just as tax evasion is a crime, but tax avoidance is permissible, in the eyes of the law, so it is, I claim, with consciousness studies. The difference is that avoiding trouble here requires a change in our basic philosophical framework. My hope is to have offered a diagnosis of the problem, a sketch of an alternative framework and some grounds for exploring it further.

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²⁴ It may be thought, by some, that absolute idealism has already been refuted. But this is not so. As Mander suggests: ‘To every good argument advanced by Russell and Moore, there is, I would argue, an equally good idealist reply’ (Mander, 1991, p. 65).

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