

# RECALCITRANT QUASI-CARTESIANISM IN RECENT PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

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## The Real Distinction and its Denial

What strikes us as puzzling about mental phenomena derives from the uneasy tension that exists between the way modern science represents reality and the unique conception we have of ourselves as conscious beings. They seem to be resistant to theorization in physical-scientific terms of mathematically formulated laws that govern natural processes. It naturally eludes the human imagination how mathematically formulated laws could capture the content of a thought or desire, the feeling of a pain or an emotion, or the phenomenal quality of a visual or auditory perception. We are therefore reasonably led to wonder whether there is an unbridgeable gulf separating mental from physical phenomena. This also explains the deeply entrenched commonsense belief that, because mental phenomena resist the sort of scientific treatment that works for everything else in nature, the place of mind in nature is unique and singular in a rather dramatic way.

It is to Descartes that modern western thought owes its spectacular theoretic documentation of the 'real distinction' between mind and nature. Descartes comes to terms systematically with the implications a mathematically formulated science has for our concept of mind. Since the single, essential characteristic of physical reality as it is conceived by him, is extension in space, everything essential to physical reality is susceptible of geometrical description, and hence to mathematical description and explanation. By contrast, the single essential characteristic of mind is thought, and thinking is intrinsically unextended or non-spatial. In consequence, the object we ordinarily refer to as a human person is a compound of a non-physical mind and a physical body.

It is true that, contrary to the apparent intractability of mental phenomena to scientific explanation and understanding, the post-Cartesian philosophy of mind has been largely and trenchantly naturalistic. From early Behaviourism down to contemporary Functionalism and a Computa-

tionalism, the dominant trend has been that of accounting for mentality in all its various dimensions in scientific terms as dictated by the overarching principle of the explanatory adequacy of unified science. So much so that all about mind that was traditionally considered to be a concern of *a priori* philosophy is now being increasingly transferred to the highly empirically specialized expertise of what is today famously known as Cognitive Science.

Naturalism is the view that everything is, in principle, ultimately completely describable and explainable in the terms of the physical sciences. Philosophical naturalists are of the opinion that the appropriate philosophical project is that of articulating a conception of the mental which is consistent with, and an aid to, scientific investigation of the mental. Given the explanatory adequacy of physical science, it directly follows that mental states are physical states. Mental phenomena are just a variety of physical phenomena. The distinctive feature of the mental can all be shown to have their places in the naturalist worldview which reckons minds as products of biological evolution and as having a physico-chemical substrate in just the way other biological phenomena do.

Logical and Methodological Behaviourism, Central-state Materialism, Anomalous Monism, Functionalism and Eliminativism are some of the most well known naturalist theories of mind that have occupied centrestage in philosophical discussion during the past fifty years or so. They all have been intent on exorcising the Cartesian ghost and leaving the machine free from its haunting effect. Even to say this is an understatement, for the idea of an immaterial mind or soul mysteriously connected with the material machine is, to the contemporary *Zeitgeist* of philosophy, no more than a relic of the past. The present counterpart of that past is Artificial Intelligence : minds are machines whether of biological 'wetware' or of non-biological hardware.

Notwithstanding the triumphant zeal of naturalist theories of various orientations, there has also been a steady trend of critiques of naturalism in recent philosophy of mind. These critiques include those as well who draw attention to methodological limitations to the complete naturalization of all mental attributes. On the whole, such critiques are a strong reminder of the forcefulness of the 'real distinction' that Cartesian dualism espouses. They reflect in a serious way the significance of the Cartesian

insight into the peculiar nature of mental phenomena, even though they are fully aware that Cartesian immaterialism carries an ontological burden of its own.

Howsoever strong the current urges may be against immaterialist ontology, contemporary philosophy is far from being vacant of a direct and full-blown legacy of dualism, as is clear from at least two major works : Karl Popper and John Eccles's *The Self and its Brain* (1977) and John Foster's *The Immaterial Self* (1990), What is note-worthy about these neo-dualists is that their dualism is set against what they are well-informed of contemporary science and science-inspired philosophical theories of mind. This apart, there also is an advocacy of attenuated dualism, 'a limited and qualified defence of dualism' (Madell, 1988, p.9).

While the above-cited examples might be deemed to be on the extreme end of the non-naturalist spectrum, there are also moderate but perspicacious instances which seem to lack of agnosticism about naturalism concerning the mental. It is to such agnosticism that the rest of the paper will direct its discussion.

### **The Perspective of Consciousness**

The foremost property of mind that underlies the crux of the recurrent problems in the philosophy of mind is consciousness. In his by now classic paper 'What is it Like to Be a Bat?' Thomas Nagel contends : 'Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem really intractable.. Without consciousness the mind-body problem would be much less interesting. With consciousness it seems hopeless' (Nagel, 1979, pp, 165-66).

Before we enter into a discussion of how consciousness renders the mind-body problem intractable, it is desirable to realize the 'perspectival' character of the phenomenon of consciousness. Descartes's *cogito* argument is sustained by what Bernard Williams call 'the perspective of consciousness', (Williams, 1978) which in turn can be equated with what we might call 'the first-person perspective'. Assuming the first-person perspective is a matter of adopting an 'internalist' stance, whereby the thinking subject suspends all assumptions about the existence of a mind-independent or physical world.

Descartes finds that when he is engaged in any conscious mental activity such as thinking, feeling pains, doubting, imagining and so

forth, it is impossible for him to doubt that he is doing so. This certitude alone is taken by him to be sufficient to establish that he has substantive knowledge of himself as a thinking self, as an essentially mental entity. In other words, from the perspective of consciousness alone Descartes proceeds to the existence of thinker. The reality of the *cogito* is therefore a first-person reality, wholly constituted by the contents of consciousness.

Williams has criticized Descartes's argument by claiming that one cannot gain an objective (third-personal) conception of there being a substantive self from the pure Cartesian reflection that starts solely from the perspective of consciousness. For it would be an unwarranted quantum leap from the 'internalist' stance of immersed, subjective, first-person perspective to the 'externalist' stance or the third-person perspective that yields a detached representation of oneself as a mental object. It is clear that these two perspectives are incompatible with each other. The important bearing of this incompatibility for any theory of mind is that if self-consciousness is a fact about human mentality, then in a crucial sense our being minded agents becomes a fact virtually impenetrable to explanation of understanding from the third-person perspective.

Williams's contention may be contested by the counter-claim that the representation of self-existence is not quite that of oneself as an object among others. For every other conscious individual has to adopt for himself or herself the same first-person perspective or internalist stance to represent his or her self-existence. So there is no sense in which the fact of self-existence is ever comprehensible from the third-person or objective perspective. And this unique feature could be characterized as the 'essential perspectivalness' of self-hood.

Thus understood, though the fact of self-existence of existence as a thinker is a substantial fact, gaining knowledge of this fact is not really gaining an *objective* conception as Williams thinks it is. It is rather a first-person knowledge and hence a *subjective* conception accruing to each individual subject's solitary, ego-centric, pure Cartesian reflection.

Whether the kind of defence of Descartes I have suggested above against Williams-type criticism is satisfactory or not, it seems intuitively right to think that no good theory of what a mental subject is can be developed by ignoring the first-person perspective. And if being

a mental subject is, necessarily, the subject's having conscious states, then it follows that conscious states occur *in* the first-person perspective. That is to say, conscious states necessarily come tied to the first-person perspective, so to speak. It is in this sense that the first-person perspective is the perspective of consciousness; it in fact is constitutive of consciousness itself.

What Descartes says about the existence of oneself as a mental subject conceivable entirely from the perspective of consciousness finds a twentieth century manifestation in Wittgenstein's treatment of solipsism in the *Tractatus*. In that context Wittgenstein says of the self that philosophy discuss: 'The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world— not a part of it' (Wittgenstein, 1961, 5.461).

Of course Wittgenstein's metaphysical subject is not the Cartesian immaterial thinking substance. The point rather is that the so-called metaphysical subject's not being part of the world, which contains the human body as well as the human psyche of the psychologist, is to be interpreted in a Cartesian spirit. The Cartesian interpretation is that the self or subject that is known to exist through pure philosophical reflection is not to be represented as an objectively ascertainable content or item of the world. This follows from the very nature of consciousness and the first-person perspective constitutive of it.

The essential perspectivalness of consciousness is precisely the unique fact that— to quote David Pears's formulation— 'every experience is had from a point of view not represented in the experience itself' (Pears, 1988, p.166). In other words, where there is conscious experience, there is an unrepresented subject at the point of origin of the field of consciousness. To adopt the first-person perspective entails *not* representing oneself as an object at all. Rather, it is to constitute oneself as the unrepresented standpoint of representations formed from that 'invisible' perspective. The Wittgensteinian metaphysical subject is the unrepresented focal point of experiences. The first-person perspective is a condition of all representations and hence always one step ahead, so to speak, of any representation.

If the essentially perspectival nature of consciousness is explained by appeal to the idea of a metaphysical subject *à la* Wittgenstein,

then consciousness in a deep sense becomes intractable not just to physical explanation, but to psychological explanation as well. As such, the Wittgensteinian account can reasonably be seen as containing the glimmer of a Cartesian, or at least quasi-cartesian, intuition about mentality.

### **Experiential Subjectivity and Physical Objectivity**

One important consequence of the foregoing discussion of the perspectival character of consciousness is that mental phenomena— at least some of them— cannot be accorded a mind-independent reality, nor therefore can they be understood from the third-person perspective from which anything objectively real is understood. And unless a mind-independent account of the mental is possible, the Cartesian insistence that the mental is non-physical would not be countervailed.

Conscious experiences like pain or pleasure, and perceptual experiences such as seeing red or hearing a melody are certainly those mental phenomena that cannot be conceived to exist mind-independently, and also cannot be captured in their crucial respects in the mind-independent terms of science. Attention has been famously drawn to this point by Nagel, who forcefully argues that the subjective phenomenal properties of experience fall outside the compass of a physicalist view of the world.

Nagel's argument hinges on the radical contrast that he thinks exists between phenomenological facts of subjective experience on the one hand, and facts about physics or neurophysiology on the other. Where the subjective character of experience is concerned, accessibility of the phenomenological facts is sensitive to the sentient, species-specific point of view of the experiencing subject. What an experience feels like is apprehensible only from the perspective of consciousness, the perspective that determines what kind of conscious organism the experienter is.

By contrast, the objective facts of physics or neurophysiology are accessible from a species-neutral point of view. In order to grasp the concepts deployed in physical or neurophysiological theory, a creature does not have to have the same perceptual apparatus or cognitive-organic constitution that we humans have : 'intelligent bats or Martians might learn more about the human brain than we ever will' (Nagel, 1979, p.172).

Given the above contrast between facts about subjective experience and neurophysiological facts, the nature of phenomenal consciousness or the subjective character of experience eludes a physicalist theory of reality.

This criticism of physicalism is reinforced by the 'Knowledge Argument' due to Frank Jackson (Jackson, 1982). Even if one were to be exhaustively cognizant of the neurophysiological facts about colour experience, one would still not know the crucial fact about the experience, namely *what it is like* to see something red or green, unless and until one had oneself the experience in question. From which it follows that physicalism cannot account for the knowledge of the qualitative character of experience.

Once again, therefore, we are reminded of the Cartesian gulf between the mental and the physical. Anti-physicalist arguments of Nagel-Jackson type sharpen the Cartesian intuition about the objective intractability of mental subjectivity, even though these arguments in no way endorse an ontological shift towards dualism.

Galen Strawson joins hands with Nagel and Jackson in holding an agnostic naturalist's view of mind : 'The physics (and neurophysiological) story of my brain is rich and detailed, but it fails to provide any theoretically satisfying account of how something undeniably real is even so much as possible : it just leaves out the phenomenal or experiential character of my experience' (Strawson, 1994, p.77-8).

Strawson sees the problem as that of lack of a theoretical integration or homogenization of experiential predicates with the non-experiential predicates of physical science. 'Such theoretical integration would require more than the formulation of statements of correlation linking experiential predicates... and non-experiential predicates, exceptionless or not. It would require a kind of theoretical homogenization which seems at present unimaginable' (*op.cit.* p.81).

Whether the satisfaction of the 'homogeneity principle' with regard to the experiential-physical relation is possible or not is a debatable question. Unlike Strawson, Colin McGinn believes that we humans are cognitively closed to finding out the nature of this relation (McGinn, 1989).

If the homogeneity principle alluded to above is to be satisfied,

it would require a theory of science that is far too distant from currently available physical theory, and a fundamentally different kind of science. Nagel's following remarks are pertinent to this effect :

We have increasing knowledge of a fascinating character about the physical conditions of particular types of conscious states, but these correlations, even if substantially multiplied, do not amount to a general explanatory theory. In order to achieve a real understanding of these matters, we would have to make progress of a fundamental kind with the mind-body problem : progress which constituted a conceptual advance, rather than merely more empirically ascertainable information, however interesting. A theory which succeeded in explaining the relation between behaviour, consciousness and the brain would have to be of a fundamentally different kind from theories about other things : it cannot be generated by the application of already existing methods of explanation (*op.cit.*, p.65).

Nagel also maintains agnosticism with respect to meeting what he considers to be 'the most interesting and difficult scientific challenge we now face' (*op.cit.*). This agnosticism apart, the significant moral that we can draw from the above line of thinking is that mental reality, at least as it involves phenomenal consciousness, poses a problem to science that is as hard as it was for Descartes *not* to draw the 'real distinction'.

It would be consistent with the temper of agnosticism to imagine that the future science that would satisfy the homogenization principle might turn out to be so very different from the already most sophisticated current science as to seem to us, or to our progeny, quite something else. Relative to the presently available theory of science, that distant 'scientific' theory is almost a metaphysical whisper in the dark, if not a metaphysical mystery. If so, then the Cartesian pondering over the nature of mental reality in terms of the metaphysics of immateriality diametrically set against the physics of classical mechanics should not appear as wrong-headed as contemporary orthodoxy projects it to be.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have confined myself to a discussion of the claim that there is a strain of quasi-Cartesianism about mental phenomena in contemporary philosophy of mind that finds its manifestation in agnostic naturalism. While one aspect of that strain is the perspectival



nature of consciousness and the consequent construal of the mental subject in non-objective terms, the other aspect is the inscrutability of phenomenal consciousness and experiential subjectivity from the third-person point of view of objective science. However, I have taken due note of the fact that though quasi-Cartesianism adverts to the insusceptibility of mental phenomena to scientific description and explanation, it does not sympathize with the ontology of substance dualism professed by uncompromising Cartesianism.

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