

YOUR BEING CONSCIOUS

MIND-BODY DUALISM, AND OBJECTIVE PHYSICALISM

Ted Honderich

Descartes believed not only that I think therefore I am but also that consciousness is not physical, unlike the brain. That makes consciousness different, which evidently it is, but also incapable of causing arm movements, which is unbelievable. Abstract functionalism is in the same boat. Disagreement between these and more ideas and theories surely has much to do with not talking about the same thing, no adequate initial clarification of the subject matter. We can get such a thing from a database. Consciousness is therefore something's being actual. What that comes to on further reflection is that it has characteristics that add up to its being subjectively physical – and partly outside a brain and partly inside. This theory of consciousness, Actualism, also passes other tests, including individuality and freedom.

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The greatest French philosopher René Descartes of the 17th Century, so wonderfully superior to his merely literary French successors today, set out to escape doubt and find certainties. From the simple premise that he was thinking something, whatever it was, even if it was false, he argued to what he took to be the certain first conclusion that he existed. *Cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I exist. But there is a problem. As the physicist Georg Lichtenberg said, Descartes seems to be going further in his first conclusion than he really could. All he could conclude with certainty from

his thinking something was not that he existed, but that *there was thinking going on*. I agree with that myself. Don't you?

Not that it leaves us without another problem, a great problem. What is thinking? What is it for someone or something to think? A little more widely, what is what you can call *cognitive consciousness*? There are also, you may be ready to agree, two other kinds of consciousness or sides or groups of elements of consciousness. One is consciousness in seeing something or in any other kind of perception, say hearing. Call that *perceptual consciousness*. The third consciousness has to do with wanting or desiring things, and what goes along with that, say intending to get things. Call that *affective consciousness*. What are each of these three sorts of consciousness?

And there is also the all-inclusive question of the nature of consciousness in general. What is it? What is the common factor or character of the three sorts?

Most past and present philosophy concerned with consciousness deals with or tries to deal only with this general or levelling question, not its three parts. But you might wonder, as a first tentative impulse about all this, whether that is right. Isn't there a lot of difference, maybe fundamental, between seeing and thinking, and between seeing and wanting? Can a single general or levelling answer be useful? Be right? Could it be that the general question has to be answered adequately, so to speak, in terms of different answers to the three particular questions?

Isn't there a pretty good additional reason for attending to different answers to the three particular questions? There been an awful lot of philosophy and science, in particular psychology, concerned only with what it takes to be very different from thinking and wanting – perception. Isn't that separate concentration likely to have been justified? There's something to be said for consensus in philosophy and science isn't there, even if you are as resistant as I am to what can be called democracy about truth?

Descartes is as well known to many philosophers now for something other than *cogito ergo sum*, indeed better

known for something else. He believed that consciousness is not physical. That is the truth of the general fact of it. Your being conscious right now in any way is not an objective physical fact. It has a nature quite unlike, say, that of the chair you are sitting on. In particular, your consciousness is different in kind, another sort of thing, from objectively physical neural states and events in your head, that soggy grey matter, that electrochemical activity.

So for Descartes there are basically the two kinds of things. There are objective physical things like chairs and there are things that are not physical – conscious states or events. What is true about reality is a *dualism* – there are the two large kinds things. There are chairs and neurons and the rest, and there is what you have in seeing something, and your thinking right now, maybe your attending to something in particular that you are seeing, and then your various stuff related to wanting or desiring. For Descartes and many or some of his successors, including a few scientists, consciousness is something you can call *spiritual*. The philosopher of science Karl Popper and the neuroscientist John Eccles wrote a book together with the title *The Self and Its Brain*.

If Popper and Eccles seemed to me to have been engaged in pomposity in their title, Descartes' mind-body dualism, as it is called, persists. It is not only a belief or attitude in religion or spirituality. It has been and is in ways defended by neuroscientists and scientifically oriented philosophers. In fact it is concealed in standard cognitive science or computerism about the mind.

That outlook and little industry, in short, is to the effect that there are neural or brain events in functional or causal connections, which of course are objectively physical, but they themselves are not the events or states of consciousness. Those conscious events are somehow or other connected with the neural or brain events in persons and other animals that have the general nature of the chair you are sitting on – but the conscious events themselves do not have that nature. As is often said, they just *supervene* on

the grey matter in your head. We'll be coming back to this neighbourhood.

You won't need telling that there are people on the other side from mind-body dualism, a lot of them. Most contemporary philosophers of mind, many of them being philosophers of consciousness rather than what we call both conscious and unconscious mentality, take it that consciousness itself *is* physical. They say plainly or they strongly imply, although they do not slow down to think about what it is to be objectively physical, that consciousness is objectively physical. I suspect that even more scientists of mind than philosophers hold that consciousness is objectively physical, the kind of thing that is taken as the subject of physics and physical science.

Such contemporary scientific philosophers who are not physicalist in this way, say David Chalmers, the brave author of *The Conscious Mind*, are out on a limb. Of course they believe and argue that that is exactly where they ought to be. Chalmers adds that exactly the relation between conscious events and brain events is what he is known for calling *the hard problem* – as against what turns up in the rest of the science and philosophy of mind. The philosopher Colin McGinn used to say, by the way, that we have as much chance of solving it as chimps have of doing Quantum Theory.

The Strengths and Weaknesses of Dualism, Objective Physicalism, More Theories

What is the main strength of dualism? That seems to me pretty clear. We are all convinced, as I have said or already, that consciousness is *different* – it's different from chairs and neurons. We are convinced partly or mainly because each of us has a *hold* on his or her consciousness, a hold that used to be condescended to by being called introspection, maybe misunderstood as a funny kind of inner seeing. There really is a difference we know about between your

being conscious right now and the chair and everything else that is part of the objective physical world. Dualism goes to town with that true idea. That has been its strength.

But there is an awful difficulty with dualism. Consciousness has physical effects. Arms move because of desires, bullets come out of guns because of intentions. Piles of people are dead because of the thinking of politicians, including some politicians of our hierarchic democracies. How could such indubitably physical events have causes that are not physical at all, for a start things not in space? How could consciousness cause those things if it itself isn't physical?

Some philosophers used to try to accommodate the fact that movements have physical causes by saying conscious desires and intentions aren't themselves causal, but they *go along with* or correlate with or, as you've heard, supervene on brain events. *Epiphenomenalism*, as it is called, is true. Conscious perceptions and beliefs and wants themselves do not explain, say, where your cup of tea is right now or your stepping out of the way of muscular joggers bearing down on you when you are out for a stroll.

But epiphenomenalism, although in my view it was fallen into accidentally by the distinguished American philosopher Donald Davidson, is now mainly believed only in remote parts of Australia, where the sun is very hot. I know only one epiphenomenalist in London, sometimes seen among the good atheists in Conway Hall. Very nice man, but dotty.

No doubt I shouldn't say those things, but maybe there is room for a little passion in philosophy, anyway a little mockery. My only passion within philosophy, putting aside political philosophy, is that epiphenomenalism is, as my teacher Bernard Williams used to say, up the stump. He stopped somebody getting a lectureship who believed it.

So, if we abandon dualism, do we have to embrace objective physicalism? Well, it certainly has to be said for it that it isn't involved in denying that what makes my fingers press keys on a keyboard is what I am thinking. But that is not the end of the story. You've already heard from me what we all believe, and what is another kind of axiom in

all this, that consciousness is *different*. Not just in degree. Not just in terms of some fancy distinction – or maybe unfancy distinction, maybe between the category of consciousness together with such things as thermometers as against the wide category of the rest of what there is, as I take it Dan Dennett supposes.

The trouble with the existing physicalisms in philosophy and science is that they just don't adequately register the difference of consciousness. Of course they try, and claim to have succeeded, but in my view and that of many others they haven't.

But disagreement about consciousness is the basic idea of a lot more than the confrontation between dualists and objective physicalists. There are a good many very different and more particular theories or analyses of the nature of consciousness – very different answers to the question of what consciousness is.

To go back to a main one, functionalism, which also turns up in cognitive science, it has one source in the fact that we ordinarily understand particular conscious states partly in terms of their causes and effects. Fear is what is owed to a kind of cause and results in a certain kind of effect. So with love, no doubt, and so on. But, for a start, that leaves something out. When I have that feeling when my heart lifts at seeing the rosy dawn over yon eastern hill, that sure is more than only effect and cause. There's more to it, indeed the main thing. Functionalism leaves something out. There are various arguments along this line.

Mixed up with a lot of functionalism is the idea that a kind of emotion, say fear again, doesn't go with just one kind of neural state but rather quite a few different ones. There is what is called *variable realization*. Sometimes fear in animals other than us is mentioned, maybe snakes. So the fear, obviously, can't be identical with any one of those neural states. That leads to taking it, confidently, as what is called *an abstract sort of thing*. What's that? Well, I guess, not physical. So, I put it to you, the advanced thinkers of the abstract functionalist kind are in the same

sinking boat with the dualists to which they are so calmly superior.

I leave it to you to think about what is called the variable realization of emotion and so on. Think with your boots on.

Another theory, *mentalism*, brings together conscious and unconscious mentality, but then conceives or anyway talks of the whole caboodle as consciousness. That fails to deal with the question of what consciousness is in the primary ordinary sense, the core sense in a good dictionary – which I trust is the question you have in mind. Certainly it's the one I've had in mind. Another theory or kind of theory, *Naturalism*, congenial to many, is vague, but has to do with a necessary respect for science. *Aspectual theories* such as panpsychism, advocated by distinguished thinkers in the past and present, including David Chalmers and Galen Strawson, strong son of a distinguished philosopher-father, do not detain the rest of us.

Disagreement, Leading Ideas, Different Questions

It's my idea that this extent of disagreement about consciousness is partly the result of philosophy being harder than science. Philosophy doesn't have proofs in it, anyway of big things. But the disagreement, including the disagreement between the dualists and their adversaries, and all the rest of it, seems to me to have a lot to do, a lot more, with what you can call *leading ideas* or attempted initial clarifications of the subject-matter of consciousness. And thus the fact that people are disagreeing, or in fact not really disagreeing, strictly speaking, but just conflicting, because they are really answering different questions.

One leading idea is to the effect that consciousness is a matter of *qualia* – elusive properties of consciousness, at least mainly with perceptual and affective consciousness. Another leading idea is that what it is for something to be conscious is for there to be *something it is like to be that*

thing. A third idea is that consciousness is a matter of *aboutnesses* or *representations* – of conscious things that are about other things, in some such way as these very words on this page are about things. Another idea is that consciousness is all involved in something called *subjectivity* – where that is mixed up with an inner self in you, an inner thing, a homunculus or small inner person, what is sometimes called a metaphysical self.

Such initial clarifications, it seems to me, have pretty obvious shortcomings. There is considerable disagreement about what *qualia* as qualities of consciousness are, say between the leading philosophers Ned Block, Chalmers, Dennett, and Tom Nagel. In any case, since qualia are only *qualities* of consciousness rather than consciousness itself, and since consciousness is allowed also to include the non-qualia that are called propositional attitudes, qualia cannot give us an adequate initial clarification of consciousness.

The second idea, being conscious is there being something it's like to be a thing – is surely circular and uninformative, like defining a horse as a thing that is horsey. We are in fact being told that what it is for something to be conscious is for there is something it is like for that thing to *be conscious*. If so, not much use.

The third idea, about aboutnesses or representations, sure has to say something about the big difference between the words on this page, the lines of type, and your conscious thoughts, maybe the thoughts you have in reading the page. And, by the way, is *all* consciousness somehow representative? No, there is consciousness generally accepted as non-representational, notably aches and objectless depressions, which aren't at all word-like.

The fourth supposed initial clarification, subjectivity, I propose to you, is again circular. This talk of subjectivity brings in a subject or self, and one of those, however you think of it, is being taken as a conscious thing.

An Adequate Clarification, Settling the Question, Objective Physicality Again

Mainstream philosophy in my idea is an equal partner to science. It is a greater concentration than science on ordinary logic – on clarity, consistency and validity, completeness, and accurate generality. Despite a history of disagreement, failing theories and resulting pessimism about understanding consciousness, it seems to me this philosophy can argue its way to an adequate theory or analysis of what it is to be conscious in the primary ordinary sense.

But in my view we have to start again – really clarify our subject at the start, settle the question of consciousness we are asking.

Let us stick to something already mentioned, a really prior matter, that our question is what it is to be conscious generally speaking in the primary ordinary sense, the *core meaning* of the word – and also what it is to be conscious in each of the three ways in the primary ordinary sense. Do you ask if that is the *right* question? Should we be asking it? Does some science ask another one? I won't get around here to defending our question, but let me say quickly it's a question that has the unique and large recommendation that it is necessary to *any* inquiry into what is called consciousness, including what people call the unconscious mentality.

What we need now in order to get going is a really adequate initial clarification of this ordinary consciousness.

Despite my objections to the five leading ideas glanced at above, there is something very important to be said for them – and for a great deal of other thinking and writing about consciousness. In the leading ideas and elsewhere there are various characterizations of consciousness that hang together, quite a pile of them.

Being conscious is a *having* of something - a usage you have heard already from me (7th paragraph above) and I am sure you didn't jib at. Being conscious is something's

being *given*, its being *experienced or undergone*, its being *for* or *to* something, something *not deduced, inferred, posited or constructed from something else*. It is something's being *present*, somehow *existing*, being *transparent*, being *right there*, being *close* or *open*, being a *content or object*, being something *real* in some sense of the word, something in the case of perception loosely called a *world*, and so on.

All that is *data* as to consciousness, a *database* owed to our holds on it. It is a lot more than a philosopher's aperçu.

All of it can be summed up in the general initial clarification of consciousness as *something's being actual*.

There are attempted objections to the clarification having to do with circularity, its being a laundry list, and its being metaphorical or otherwise figurative, as indeed it is. The objections, I think, can be met. The last one can be met by remembering that what is well known to have happened throughout the history of science. That is exactly progress from the metaphorical or otherwise figurative to the literal.

At this point in our reflections, having glanced at dualism, objective physicalism, and other previous theories of consciousness, which all have some relation or other to objective physicality, and having come to an initial clarification of consciousness as something's being actual, you may agree it is at least apposite to look at a certain matter. It is at least apposite to do what I think is not done by any of the various past theorists and what is prompted by talk of actuality. That is getting a little clearer about objective physicality. It's a good idea to slow down and take some time thinking more about this dominant understanding of the physical in science and philosophy. A decent account has two parts, about which I'll be very quick.

(1) What is objectively physical has *physical* characteristics, having to do with science's inventory, scientific method, space and time, particular lawful connections, categorical lawful connections, ordinary or macrocosmic physical things being perceived, microcosmic and other things

being related to them, ordinary things being in points of view, resulting differences, primary and secondary properties.

(2) As for *objective* characteristics, these have to do with separateness from consciousness, not being private, not being in anyone's privileged access, related in a way to truth and logic, scientific method again, no inconsistent metaphysical selves, hesitation about consciousness in the primary ordinary sense having all the above characteristics of the objectively physical.

That is more than you get in existing theories of consciousness.

The Actualism Theory of Consciousness – Subjective Physicality

Everything so far issues immediately in two questions about consciousness. What is actual? And this being actual is what? Consider perceptual consciousness first.

What is actual now with my and probably your perceptual consciousness is only a *room*. Much that is often assigned to consciousness or conscious mentality, neither adequately initially clarified, is indubitably *not* actual – qualia, inner representations or aboutnesses, what is called mental paint, something it's like to be something, metaphysical self or inner subject. Nor, to mention a couple more candidates put up by philosophers, does what is actual include a *vehicle* of consciousness, which Colin McGinn drives around in, or the *medium* of it, or any neural properties explanatory of what is actual.

In general, what *is* actual with perceptual consciousness is only a *subjective physical world* – more particularly a piece, stage or part of one – say a room. No content or object that is other than exactly such a world.

Actualism in its denials having to do with qualia is of course in open to historic objections having to do with a similarity of perceptual consciousness to illusion and

hallucination. Actualism can surely defeat them. But I skip past that work to come. Actualism is not what talk of illusion and hallucination was against, an intuition called naive realism by Freddie Ayer, now sometimes called direct realism. Actualism, despite a relation to naive realism, doesn't derive from it at all, or depend on whatever support that intuition had, but is independent of it and instead rests on a wholly different line of argument.

Now what is it for subjective physical worlds *to be actual*? It is for them to be subjectively physical.

The characteristics of subjective physical worlds, more particularly parts of them, are open to literal specification. They are *counterparts* of the characteristics of the objective physical world, some identical, some not. Such a subjective world is physical in being within science's inventory and method, spatial and temporal, lawful, etc. That such a world has such physical characteristics is in no way put in doubt by its also having subjective characteristics – inseparableness from consciousness, privacy, and so on. No quick assumption there or loose talk.

Such worlds are no less real for being myriad in number and each having lawful dependencies not only on the objective physical world but also on the neural or other machinery of perceivers. Such worlds are specifically real, of course, in sharing characteristics with the objective physical world. They are also real in other senses – in one of them more real than the objective physical world. Objections to this completed theory of perceptual consciousness have to do with circularity, consensus, unbelief, two rooms, rhetoric, supervenience and so on. I think they can be met.

So, in short, your being perceptually conscious right now *is* the existence of a world out there, very likely a piece of it that is a room. That, I repeat, is not some rhetorical or poetical or feelingful verbiage but a real fact that can be made very clear.

Subjective physical worlds and their parts or whatever are plain enough states of affairs or circumstances, ways things

or objects are, sets of things and properties. These subjective worlds are a vast subset, the objective physical world being a one-member subset, of the single all-inclusive world that there is, *the physical world*, that totality of the things that there are. They aren't made less real, say taken out of space out there, by their being myriads of them, one per perceiver, nor by they or their parts being temporary or fleeting. For a start, physics is full of fleeting things.

What is to be said not about perceptual consciousness but about cognitive and affective consciousness? Does cognitive and affective consciousness consist only in *conscious representations*? Do these consciousnesses consist only a two-term relation between a representation and what it represents? Our holds on our own conscious representations do indeed give us their likeness to *linguistic representations* – spoken or written representations.

So are thinking and wanting to be understood as only or purely representations? Or representations along with attitudes to them? Understood by way of the doctrines of a language of thought, or a relationism related to functionalism, or the persuasive linguism of John Searle and others?

No. Conscious representations in actual consciousness *are* such signs, but with the additional essential characteristic that they are indeed *actual* – as those other things talked of with thinking and wanting definitely are not – say funny self, vehicle, medium, and neural properties.

If representations are what is actual with cognitive and affective consciousness, what is it for the representations of cognitive and affective consciousness to be actual? The answer is just that it is for them to be subjectively physical in their own way, differently from the subjective physical worlds of perceptual consciousness.

Their characteristics are again counterparts of the characteristics of the objective physical world – and of subjective physical worlds, some identical, more of them not. They are within the inventory of science and its method. They are spatial but not actual as such. Their lawful dependencies are different,

including a unique dependency on subjective physical worlds. They are not within points of view and do not have primary and secondary properties. They are more similar to subjective physical worlds with respect to their characteristics of subjectivity, starting with inseparability from consciousness. In terms of a very well-known line by Jerry Fodor, being actual is the something else that conscious representations are in virtue of which they are real things on which we have a hold. That is the solution to a lot of puzzlement about representations.

So – that, in short, is the new and different analysis or theory of consciousness that is actualism. It leaves secondary questions unanswered. It's not all of the final truth. It is, then, a fertile research project for both science and philosophy. You can call it a workplace.

Criteria, Individuality, Freedom

Actualism's satisfactions of eight criteria for a good theory of consciousness, several already mentioned, are pretty obvious and in all cases very arguable. The reality of consciousness is explicit in its physicality, and in particular the subjective physical world that we can say *is* you perceptual consciousness. The difference of consciousness is explicit and far from factitious in its subjectivity, which includes an individuality. Its three sides are not submerged in a false uniformity.

Evidently actualism is a *naturalism*. It deals clearly with questions of the relationships of consciousness, first to brains – there are ordinary lawful connections, ordinary connections of natural or scientific law. The theory leaves no explanatory gap. It leaves all of consciousness indubitably a subject for science, with which it is well forward and with which it faces no unique difficulties.

Come back to Descartes. You will remember that he took himself to have proved, by way of the Cogito, the existence in each of us of a metaphysical self. You definitely don't get one of those with Actualism. But you do get a *unity* for

yourself, a *unity* that is a matter of lawful connections between things in it, first of all a subjective physical world and also your cognitive and affective existence. This is an individuality that you can also think of usefully as the living of a life. It is a long way from an homunculus.

And something else. Descartes believed in free will, that our choices are not effects, not necessary upshots of chains of causes and effects. He did not accept the truth of determinism – that our choices are exactly such effects. As such good philosophers as Robert Kane have argued, the mistaken impulse or conviction of free will has its origin in the conviction that we, each of us, has a certain *standing* – that each of us, to be rhetorical, is not just another *thing*, along with the chairs.

Actualism explains that sense of standing, doesn't it? It makes a whole subjective physical world depend not only on another world out there, but also on you. You are, if not a creator, a contributing demigod, one of two sources of a reality. Cheer up if you've rationally given up on free will. Be a little proud rationally of your humanity.

This article is a bird's-eye view of a big book with the bird flying high and fast. I worry about it that someone once said to the famous Harvard philosopher Quine, about Popper, that Popper lectured with a broad brush, to which Quine mused that maybe he thought with one too. Well, I admit that everything above is at least broad-brush, and must raise questions, but you can find some medium brushwork in a lecture that is online – at the website <http://www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/~uctytho/>

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