What Does Solving the Problem “Consciousness-Body” Mean?

Gasparyan Diana
Higher School of Economics, Moscow

Abstract
Consciousness is not an object that can be enumerated or related to some other object. It cannot be separated from us; we cannot step aside from it or distance ourselves from it, for consciousness is non-spatial.

Key Words: consciousness–body, relationship of causality, subject–object dualism, meta-description.

If we try to characterize the common vector (direction) of contemporary investigations into consciousness, we can find (with, of course, minor reservations) the retention of some kind of “privileged vocabulary,” particularly of scientific vocabulary which still defines the criteria for a satisfactory solution of the “consciousness–body” problem. We mean that in the very structure of the solution to this problem, imperatives of science or of methods of natural science can be found with ease. It can most clearly be seen by demonstrating the productive connection between body and consciousness, i.e. in the understanding of how the physical produces the non-physical.

From the language of physics we know that to describe some physical state or object means to provide as detailed a description as possible of all its relationships with other states and objects. But if we admit that mental states cannot be equated with physical states and have completely their own ontological status then it would be quite reasonable to expect that the type of relationship between mind and body will differ from that used in science. For in the language of physics we can describe the relationship between two tables, but not between a table and its mental image; the natural science approach can describe only a relationship between objects, but the consciousness of a thing is not in and of itself a thing. This last statement nowadays is disputed much

Corresponding author: Gasparyan Diana
more rarely than it was even quite recently. It is generally accepted that if physical reality has some extensiveness, mental reality has no such characteristic; if physical events possess a number of material characteristics (e.g. mass, weight, solidity, strength, etc.), mental events do not have them. The idea of an elephant does not evoke its appearance in our brain; tasting wine does not allow one to recover the traces of wine in our brain; and our recollections of Jack’s singing yesterday are neither loud, or quiet, or false, although the song itself could correspond to any one of these characteristics. Nowadays philosophy has come to realize that we can get very deep in our studies and registration of changes in the brain which accompany mental states; yet that still does not mean that we have gained access to the mental states themselves, which is commonly called “first-person ontology (Nagel, 1974).”

The problem is, however, that the connections between consciousness and objects, in the vast majority of contemporary investigations, are explained on a model of the connections between the objects themselves. In the language in which the relationships between objects are described, all else is also described. And should we succeed in describing in this language the relations between the physical and the mental, we would have then achieved some explanation. This is the very scheme of coming to a resolution to this problem. Hence it is clear that if the basic relationship between physical objects is a relationship of causality, then this is the very relationship inherent in our attempts to deal with the “consciousness—body” problem. And this means we would be attempting to explain how something that has no physical characteristics can appear as a reason for that which indeed possesses such characteristics, and vice versa.

The very broaching of the problem itself is based on the model of experimental science: it would indicate that something exists beyond the limits of consciousness and would then try to ascertain the causal or functional connection between the conditioning and the conditioned. But if we admit that consciousness is not a thing, then why can we count on finding a connection between it and the body like that which would be found between two bodies? Searches for the physical reasons of consciousness are, however, equivalent to attempts to present the connections between the physical and the mental as the connection between one object and another. And in order to describe in what way consciousness is connected to the body within the natural science approach, consciousness and body must appertain to the same field of investigation, that is to say, have one and the same nature. But, as mentioned above, consciousness is not a thing that resembles our body.

It is hard, however, to deny that the difference between body and consciousness is not a material one. In other words, the connection between consciousness and objects can only be described as conceptual, but not as physical, chemical or biological. The problem is, however, that conceptual difference remains a part of consciousness. Conceptual connections presuppose the existence of a consciousness which sets them, these connections, in place. Therefore it may be more reasonable to enter a debate on consciousness in the language of consciousness itself, without resorting to the premises of physical experience. One cannot ignore the fact that all attempts to explain consciousness through “non-consciousness” (for example, “physical”) are identified as “non-consciousness” by consciousness itself. For example, when we say that the brain induces consciousness, we cannot get away from the fact that this “brain which induces my consciousness” exists in my consciousness: the experience of consciousness turns out to be inevitably wider than any objects or phenomena which, when summoned at various instances, produce consciousness. For example, when we say, “I experience a feeling of pleasure,” the “pleasure” cannot be separated, even logically, from the “consciousness of pleasure.” Therefore it might be more correct to say that, “my consciousness induces my brain which induces my consciousness.”
We must mention one more problem in this regard. One may object that the status of the “connection” does not need to be a physical one, and that it can also be a logical one. Here we encounter, however, some more difficulties; in this case, the subject–predicate model or subject–object dualism is applied, which leads to a series of complications in logic. It can be demonstrated as follows: if we attempt to make consciousness an object, then something must also exist that is conscious of this consciousness, which becomes an object in the process. If we accept the pair “consciousness – object of consciousness,” then there must exist a third term that would, in turn, make consciousness itself the object of consciousness. Here we have two options: either we stop at one of the terms of the series, with the whole series plummeting into the realm of the unconscious; or we agree to an endless regression which leads to nothing. The consequence of this is the inapplicability to consciousness of the subject–object mechanism and that this consciousness which is conscious of objects coincides with the consciousness which is being objectified (Sartre, 1943).

If we were to summarize everything said above, we may say that a series of fundamental premises of science stops working as one would like it to work as soon as it is applied to consciousness. If we attempt to approach consciousness as we approach the world of physical objects, it is difficult not to notice some obvious difficulties. Namely, it is different from the situation when there is a human researcher and an object of his investigation; consequently, there is some experience which itself is investigated as opposed to that consciousness which is identical to man’s experience. It cannot be separated from us; we cannot step aside from it or distance ourselves from it, for consciousness is non-spatial. Consciousness is not an object that can be enumerated or related to some other object.

If we try to apply any “type” or “sort” relationship or subject-object schemes, then we immediately come up against paradoxes in logic. It is connected with the fact that we try to gain access to consciousness through the very framework of logical categories which is the fundamental attribute of consciousness itself. What can be meta-description in this case? (Wittgenstein, 1958). Moreover, consciousness itself appears as the only condition for the possibility of operating these categories. For example, consciousness can not be defined through type or sort, not because consciousness is the most general idea, but because it is not an idea at all, but the source of all the ideas, schemes, and images, and the like.

Therefore, in the question, “how should we understand consciousness”, consciousness confirms the impossibility of its elimination, for understanding is but another name for consciousness.

References
Nagel T. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" Philosophical Review 1974;S3:435-450.