Some Difficulties of Physicalistic Approach

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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.

In the 20th century, consciousness became one of the most favored topics in philosophical studies. Consciousness was much discussed; those who tried to explain consciousness sought to explain it in such a way that would suit not only philosophers representing multifarious schools and trends, but also scientists and even common people. Some of modern scientists and philosophers admit that the problem of consciousness is the ‘last unconquered fortress’ on the way of the triumphantly marching science. However, back in the 19th century Arthur Schopenhauer called consciousness ‘the rub of the Universe’ meaning that consciousness retained its obscure nature and remained a ‘blind spot’ of a kind, in spite of the obvious progress in other areas of human knowledge. Schopenhauer’s opinion can be classified among those of pessimistic philosophers. The latter, in turn, can be categorized into those who believe that the problem of consciousness is unlikely to ever be solved (the moderate skeptics) and those believing that the problem is fundamentally unsolvable (the radical skeptics). According to the radically pessimistic point of view, the fact that the problem of consciousness has not been yet solved is the natural outcome of its fundamental insolvability. The moderately pessimistic position consists in stating the prematurity of interpretations of experimental data obtained by scientific methods (first of all, by neurosciences) and in putting forward arguments against the existence of a possibility to find a logically consistent solution to the problem of consciousness.

There are, however, optimistic philosophers as well. They consider the ‘secret’ of consciousness to be a merely temporary one, and expect to find, quite soon, a conclusive and irrefutable solution to the question regarding structure of consciousness and the mechanism of generation of thoughts. Adherents of this opinion support their positions by references to brilliant achievements in various areas of neurophysiology, from neurolinguistics to neuroengineering, which, indeed, cannot be disregarded. The ‘optimists’ can also be moderate or radical ones. The former believe that the impossibility to obtain a conclusive and consistent answer to the question of ‘how consciousness is structured?’ does not, in itself, preclude the possibility of finding answers to individual questions, such as ‘how does consciousness tackle certain tasks?’ or ‘can one teach a computer to think?’. Radical optimists, in turn, hold that finding a conclusive and consistent solution to the problem of consciousness is not only possible.
but, furthermore, is not as difficult as it appears to some philosophers.

Meanwhile 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, to use the words of Richard Rorty, 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.

It means that the master vector of manipulations with consciousness in the second half of the 20th century was directed to either reducing consciousness to certain physiological assumptions or to reducing it to some other objective forms (such as social or linguistic relations).

For instance, the most common type of reductionism – the neurophysiological reductionism – holds that there is no consciousness at all; there are only neurophysiological processes and brain structure. Thus, according to the theory of identity, consciousness is equaled with neuronal excitations in brain. This theory holds that each mental state is identical to certain state of the brain, i.e. mental state and the corresponding neuronal state is essentially one and the same thing. Thus, followers of the theory of identity believe that, though mental states can indeed be conceived separately from the material systems that generate them, and could exist per se, actually such mental states coincide with the material systems. Philosophers who adhere to the theory of identity often use the following example illustrating their concept: Ontologically, a cloud of particles is different from, for instance, a chair that such particles form; however, actually, such cloud of particles and the chair are essentially one and the same object.

Apart from the physiological reductionism, there are other methods that eliminate consciousness. For instance, there are theories equating functional potential of consciousness with consciousness as it is. Such theories treat mental states as being in a certain functional state. The basic thesis of functionalism consists in the idea of transferring consciousness from its carrier (i.e., human brain) to other possible carriers. In other words, certain functional states can be ‘run’ on fundamentally dissimilar physical systems, primarily on computers. Thus, the function of consciousness can be performed not only by biological systems (human brain) but also, for example, by information systems. Such theories, in essence, reduce consciousness as well – this time, to functional operations of consciousness.

There some well-known difficulties of such approaches. First of all even if we thoroughly examine an actively functioning brain and study all the processes that occur in it, we will nevertheless not be able to understand the exact way in which it induces perception. Therefore, perception should be essentially different from physical processes occurring in brain, and cannot be deduced from physical facts. Thus, we can interpose an objection, to the theory of identity, by saying that the thesis of identity of mental and physical processes is void of any clear meaning – in contrast with the identity of the chair and the cloud of particles. In the latter case, we can specify precisely the conditions of identification, i.e., imagine, for instance, observing the boundaries of continuous motion of the particles, fixing their position relative to other particles, comparing all the data etc. Yet, in the case concerning the identity of mental and physical processes, we do not have such criteria at our disposal. Furthermore, with respect to identity of the chair and the cloud of particles, we are dealing with equating two objects of the same substantial origin (both are physical). However, when we attempt to equate brain with consciousness, we are, in fact, trying to declare sameness of substances of supposedly different nature.

In turn, there are certain counterarguments against the functional theory as well. We are quite able, for instance, to imagine a situation when we are observing implementation of a functional chart on a specific carrier (e.g., a device tackling mathematical problems), which is by no means accompanied with presence of any ‘personal experience’. But if this is so, mental
states can always be declared supplemental to functional operations, and, consequently, it will not be correct to ontologically equate them.

Below I will try to demonstrate clue roots of physicalistic approaches and then I will emphasize those main problems.

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 consciousness 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 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 — and, indeed, science itself, it seems — 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, according to Thomas Nagel, is commonly called “first-person ontology.”

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.

In other words, the problem is showing how a non–physical event may suddenly obtain from certain physical processes which exert an influence on other physical processes. 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.

The application of a causal description to consciousness comes up against well–known difficulties, as the mental cannot influence the physical due to the closeness of causal inference in the physical world. Likewise, the physical cannot influence the mental firstly due to the same reason and, secondly, because, as an example, the same physical stimulants in no way induce the same mental events (for example, reading a proof of the Pythagorean theorem for the first time may not lead to an understanding of the theorem; the second time may lead to such an understanding; and a third reading may again
result in the theorem’s not being understood. In the course of all this, we may remember our understanding but not experience the understanding itself). It may not be possible to think of an inference between the physical and the mental because the causal inference mechanism is always the possibility of the process of opening the subsequent and uninterrupted process of transferring some states into others while retaining the qualitative homogeneity of these states. Indeed, causality by definition does not have ontological breaks within itself (Leibniz’s *natura non facit saltum*), and in attempts to infer a transfer of physical changes into mental states one would need to allow a certain short circuit, a certain leap, which will remain in principle irreproducible in any experimental environment. It is impossible to show in an uninterrupted way how water that is sampled in the mouth changes into taste. An analysis would lead us from a change in the receptors in the mouth to changes in the neurons in the brain, but this cerebral state would not be identical to the subjective experiencing of the taste of the water since, quite obviously, consciousness of a thing in and of itself is not a thing.

In connection with what has been said, we then come to a rather curious situation: a majority of researchers do not agree in theory with the naturalization of consciousness, and practically no one admits its materiality, instead agreeing with the immateriality of thought and with the particular ontological status of the mental. In theory, everything is namely as such, but as soon as one starts talking about investigative practice, one begins to work with consciousness as if it were a thing. This is, in general, not surprising since language obligatorily refers to things. A word is the presence of an absent object and even pronouncing the word “consciousness” seemingly forces one into the subject–predicate form, and for that reason it is not easy to refrain from attributing objectivity to consciousness.

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 a 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 fear,” the “fear” cannot be separated, even logically, from the “consciousness of fear.” 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 arbitrarily at one of the terms of the series, with the whole series plummeting into the realm of the unconscious, that is, we lose not only the supposed “object,” but also the pole of this hypothetical “object.” Or we agree to an endless regression which leads to nothing.

These ideas, by the way, have had a long history, and can already be found in the work of Wittgenstein (as well as, more recently, in the work of Roger Penrose). Although, of course, the first time we encounter these ideas with a more involved
explication of the indicated difficulties is in the framework of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, the consequences of which are 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. Already within the framework of the principle of intentionality, one is dealing with the existence of a certain inevitable intertwining of the perspective and the object upon which this perspective is directed, or, in other words, the intertwining of the object of consciousness and that of which one is conscious is guaranteed, as is their initial unity. And in this way the phenomenological approach to consciousness compels one to determine consciousness by means of a tautological process of guaranteeing the presence of the object of consciousness, that is, in other words, it tries, against the canons of formal logic, giving consciousness a “definition,” not saying “consciousness is something,” but “consciousness is when ...,” then adding: “there is an object of consciousness.”

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, that it is impossible to establish between physical and non–physical experience the relationships of a physical investigation. The registration of the attendant changes in the brain present a certain language of correlates which, as it were, remains external in relation to the psychic experience of the subject. A mental state, as distinguished from the physical state, may not be related to any other physical state since it is without substance or space, and, secondly, since it cannot be laid out in a causal chain of physical events.

If we try to apply to consciousness any “type” or “sort” relationship or subject–object schemes, then we immediately come up against paradoxes in logic. This 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. It is not clear, however, what meta–description can be in this case. Moreover, consciousness itself appears as the only condition for the possibility of operating these categories. It is impossible to determine consciousness by means of subject–object or type–sort distinctions, not only because it is not an object or type, nor a subject or sort, but also because consciousness inevitably turns out to be “prior” to all other similar distinctions. My consciousness is not an object for a very simple reason: I am, as it were, this consciousness. At the same time, references to another consciousness turn out to be useless here since each person only has the experience of his own consciousness, and any other experience would only be able to go through his own consciousness. For that reason, consciousness, being a condition of the possibility of the objectivity of the external world, is not itself subject to objectification.

We will say the following in conclusion: insofar as the goal of the present study was to characterize briefly some difficulties in the application of physical or logical types of relationships to consciousness and body, by the same general token we were also concerned with problems of the approach to consciousness which may be designated as “descriptive” (by which it is not obligatory to imply the method of “introspection”). This very approach may be designated to a significant degree as privileged if one were to pay attention to the direction of the main investigations into the philosophy of consciousness being carried out nowadays.

In the meantime, already in the framework of the theory of psychoanalysis, as well as in other work by psychologists (in the work, for example, of Jean Piaget), and in the work of a remarkable number of twentieth–century philosophers (Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre, and others), one may clearly follow the idea that the condition of every conscious act are those acts which take place outside of or without the knowledge of any reflex, and remaining inaccessible for the latter. Here it is said that a certain “unobjejectifiable remnant” remains in our thought which, as it were, is itself also thought. In this regard, it makes sense to mention the famous experiments of Piaget in which children performing the simplest arithmetical actions were not able to answer the question as to how they came up with them, they simply duplicated the solutions. Their explanations consisted of the repetition of arithmetical action. If one were to extrapolate from these
most basic observations work on consciousness in general, one could conclude that an understanding of the entire multitude of things which make our consciousness accessible does not, meanwhile, allow us in any way to understand how this understanding itself is constructed. It is not possible to devise an algorithm which would reveal the process of our understanding in such a way that not only could someone reproduce it, but we could as well, since, as was said before, re-reading of the Pythagorean theorem does not guarantee comprehension of that state of understanding which we experienced the other day. That said, it is much more appropriate to claim that our understanding just happened to us, and our language here is sufficiently indicative when we say that “the idea just came to us.”

This, as it were, is a completely phenomenological method of problematizing consciousness since one is dealing with a passive and an active synthesis (that is, the thing which objectifies and the thing which is actually objectified) which, as can be shown, is not completely authentic in the majority of modern investigative strategies. It seems to us, however, that philosophers of consciousness have to be interested in this active synthesis, the very machinery and schematics of how everything takes place. At the same time, it occurs that the main thing is happening on a secondary stage or completely backstage. But while something is taking place, during the course of attempts to objectify this something, it immediately dissolves into the terms “consciousness” and “body,” and, consequently, reveals the problem of how they are connected. In attempts at finding out “how does consciousness work,” we bring uncontrollable indignation into those processes which transpire completely on their own. What has been said reminds us of attempts to catch sight of “that place where we aren’t.” If we’re not there, then how will we catch sight of it? A no less indicative illustration of this point is our incapacity to catch sight of our own body as a whole in the way in which we see the bodies of other people, since the very organ of sight, the eye, belongs to this same body and is a part of it.

By resorting to the famous statement by Wittgenstein on an eye which does not see itself in the process of seeing (we see what an eye sees, but we do not see a sight of the eye for such capacities have the dimension of length, but do not have dimensions of turning on itself), one may notice that if an eye were to see itself in the process of seeing, we would always only see this eye, and not the objects around us. If we wanted to make an eye the object of our investigation, we would then be obliged to remove it, initially deprived of the function of sight, and place it in a test tube. But it is impossible, as it were, at the same time to examine the eye in the test tube and to be without the eye (the savior role of the second eye turns out quite obviously to be useless when we are talking about consciousness, of which there is one...). The general sense of the problematicness of attribution of a descriptive principle to consciousness is expressed in the fact that, having assumed the position at which we are looking, we lose the position from which we were looking.

In terms of phenomenology, we may say the following. When the subject tries to construct a method of its parts, to reveal its mechanism, to describe its structure, processes, and machinery corresponding to the work of constructing consciousness, it will comprehend nothing other than what is comprehended in the act of turning the object of consciousness onto itself, of turning in emptiness. A program for constructing the mechanics of its design turns into the construction of this “nothing.” A more graphic principle of intentionally aiming at the object is possible; in the movement striving to seize this very intention as the object of the intentional act, the “nothing” turns out to be the object of this movement. To be more correct about the matter, we have the absence of every object.

Hence it follows that mental states (an even better term is “mental events,” emphasizing that we step out of our role as passive witnesses to our own always hidden activeness) are given to us in the framework of actual fact, once “everything has already happened.” And this is also how understanding is constructed: at some point we become witnesses to our own understanding. 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