Tartaglia, James. "The Problem of Consciousness." *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 83–100. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474247696.ch-004>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 09:59 UTC.

Copyright © James Tartaglia 2016. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

The Problem of Consciousness

I should say that what the physiologist sees when he looks at a brain is part of his own brain, not part of the brain he is examining.

Bertrand Russell, 1927₁

1. Consciousness and objective thought

Imagine you are in a cinema, watching a movie with one hundred or so other people. Our everyday way of thinking about the nature of the world, which we shall call 'objective thought', provides a straightforward way of understanding the situation you are in. Thus according to objective thought, the room you are in consists of a space bounded by walls, floor and ceiling, all of which are composed of certain materials. Inside the space there is air, itself a kind of material, which surrounds rows of chairs facing an illuminated screen, and about one hundred people seated on the chairs. All these objects have a certain size and shape and are composed of certain materials: carbon-based organic materials in the case of the people, various synthetic materials for the chairs and screen, and largely silicon-based materials for the building. The basic picture objective thought presents of the cinema, then, is of objects in space made up of various different types of material. This picture readily extends to take in the whole universe: the cinema is located on planet Earth, which is itself simply a very large object within a vast space containing astronomical objects composed of various materials.

Objective thought provides the foundation for all our understanding of the world.² We may deepen the understanding it provides, and on occasion adjust it slightly, but it remains presupposed for the majority of our lives, and our more rarefied, scientific understandings are inevitably referred back to it. However objective thought can be thrown into disarray by reflection upon a simple fact which, although open to numerous interpretations, we know in some sense to be true. This is the fact that the world is experienced from a variety of different perspectives. Thus when sitting in the cinema, you know that the other people are experiencing the same environment as you but from different perspectives. So, for instance, the others are seeing the screen from different angles; some have better eyesight or hearing; some may be aware of the frame of their glasses or the fringe of their hair; some may be diverted by aches or pains; some may be struggling to understand the language; some may be misinterpreting the plot;

some may be transfixed by parallels between the situations faced by the characters and their own life; some may be mentally rehearsing sentences for the review they have to write; some may be drunk; and some may be sleepy. In short, we know that each person in the cinema is a unique centre of consciousness.

This simple reflection supplements the objective scene with a cacophony of experiences which objective thought cannot conceive as objects of a certain shape and size that help to fill the space of the cinema. For there are no ethereal images hovering behind the eyes of the people watching the screen; there is only flesh and blood. Once we know this, we also know that we cannot appeal to shape, size or material to comprehend the nature of experiences, and so objective thought leaves us at a loss as to what to say they are. We recognize them from our own case, of course, and can work out roughly what kinds of experiences people must be having in certain circumstances. However when asked to say what experiences, thoughts, feelings and other conscious states *are*, objective thought will not help us. We are left unable to fit them into our understanding of an ordinary situation such as sitting in a cinema; we know the experiences are 'all around us' in some vague sense, but the more we think about it, the more they seem like an incomprehensibly alien addendum to the world we understand.

The philosophical problem with consciousness, then, is that it is something we know exists, even though it apparently has no place within the world.³ This is because objective thought is *centreless*.⁴ Thus if we think about what the cinema scene objectively amounts to, there is nothing there to indicate that the organic objects should be centres of conscious experience; there is nothing in the scene to indicate that there should be any experiential centres at all. And yet we know that each person in the cinema is an experiential centre. If you are one of them, the world exists from your perspective: the screen, soundtrack and much more, are experientially present to you from the perspective of a particular location in space and time, and you can truly say things such as, 'that's the screen as seen from my perspective'.

That objective thought is centreless is easily overlooked because we are so accustomed to superimposing experiential centres onto the objective world. Moreover once superimposed, objective thought, and by extension science, can explain why each centre has the experiences it does, with the consequent explanatory interweaving creating the impression that consciousness belongs to the world of objective thought after all. So, for instance, once we have superimposed experiential centres, we can say why the screen looks different to somebody on the front row than it does to somebody near the back, in terms of different angles to the screen resulting in different images projected onto retinas; the explanation is not unlike that of why two cameras set up in different places record different images. Science can even explain more puzzling matters, such as why somebody with complete achromatopsia sees the screen only in black-and-white, by telling us about how their cone cells are reacting to the light, or about an abnormality in the visual processing in their brain. However, for any of this information to have explanatory purchase on consciousness, we first need to know that people are centres of consciousness.

Since we already know this, we are able to recognize physical information about people as relevant to consciousness when appropriate correlations exist; but if we did

not, the correlations would not seem relevant. After all, we do not think the physical differences between a black-and-white and a colour analogue camera explain the differences between the experiences of the two cameras, because we do not think cameras have experiences. If we did, then the fact that the film in the colour camera has light sensitive silver halides in red-, blue- and green-sensitive layers, whereas the film in the black-and-white one has only a single layer of silver halides, would, *ceteris paribus*, be just as obviously relevant to explaining why some cameras lack colour experience, as brain damage is to explaining why some people lack colour experience. Of course, brain activity does explain consciousness while silver halides do not, but this fact is not accounted for by anything objective thought or science tells us about the former but not the latter; our objective conception of human brain activity no more implicates consciousness than our conception of a silver halide does.

In summary, then, objective thought is centreless in that it is blind to the idea that in virtue of being a certain object, the world exists from the perspective of that object and thus the object is a centre of consciousness. In fact, objective thought is blind to the whole idea of 'being an object', and simply tells us what objects are; it tells us what humans and rocks are, but has nothing to say about *being a human* or *being a rock*. As such, it seems that consciousness could never in principle be implicated in anything objective thought, and by extension science, has to say about human beings: no matter what strange and complex cells are discovered in our brains, no matter what special feedback circuitry is found, this information will simply contribute to a better description of a certain kind of object, and the fact that if *you* are that object then the world will appear from your perspective will be missed out.

If the preceding line of reasoning is right, then objective thought, and the science we have built upon it, seems to be incomplete, and this incompleteness could hardly be a trivial matter given the fundamental importance of consciousness to human beings; as Einstein once put it, without consciousness 'the world would be nothing but a pile of dirt'.⁵ Moreover, the fact that objective thought misses out consciousness seems to indicate something much more serious than a temporary shortfall in our understanding, of the kind we might expect to see redressed in the course of ordinary scientific research. This is because objective thought seems to omit consciousness as a matter of principle, which suggests a fundamental conceptual limitation to our scientific ways of thinking about the world.

As such, the existence of consciousness holds out the prospect that reality transcends the world of objective thought: that our ordinary way of understanding the world might not capture everything there is to the world, given that it apparently does not capture consciousness. More specifically, since consciousness seems to transcend the world of objective thought, this raises the prospect that reality transcends the physical universe, and consequently that – as religions have so often told us – objective thought does not describe the final context of existence. And since nihilism is most conspicuous when we apply objective thought to human life, and thereby view ourselves as simply bodies moving around and making noises to each other, the challenge of consciousness to objective thought provides reason to believe that nihilism might not be true. In short, consciousness holds out the hope that the world of objective thought, in which the truth of nihilism seems unavoidable, is transcended by a wider context of existence in

which nihilism might not be true. And although there is no good reason to hope that nihilism is false, this is something people have always hoped.

The suggestion here is not that philosophical interest in consciousness primarily stems from a latent desire for nihilism to be false; although this does seem to be true of certain writers who use its supposed inexplicability as a premise to reach religious conclusions.⁶ Rather, the suggestion is that the issue of natural human interest from which the problem ultimately derives its appeal is the question of the meaning of life; the connection has been covered over, as is so often the case, but its presence sustains interest in the problem. This comes out most conspicuously in the ubiquitous description of consciousness as a *mystery*. Mysteries raise the prospect of our not having grasped the true significance of human life, a prospect appealing to some philosophers but annoying to others. Scientists sometimes get annoyed too, typically regarding the suggestion of such an obvious mystery as an affront to their expertise. When they do, they tend to react in one of two equally ineffectual ways. Either, they wilfully miss the point of the simple thought process required to establish the philosophical problem; a tactic also popular among the scientifically-minded public. Or, they acknowledge the problem, and then claim to have solved it by citing their own empirical research on the brain; or evidence about evolutionary history; or some other objective scientific data that is tangential to the problem.

2. Indirectness and self-awareness

When we imagine the experiences in the cinema scene, we most naturally (if we are sighted) think of visual images; vision is our dominant sense. So, for example, we think of an expansive blurry image for a person at the front with poor eyesight, or a sharp image framed by curtains and the backs of people's heads for someone at the back with 20/20 vision. We know this is what they would see, but the images do not belong in our objective conception of the scene. Now according to the way of thinking about experience being taken for granted here, there is a sense in which the cinema-goers do not see the screen itself, but rather a visual image of it. But there is also another sense in which they *do* see the screen, since having a visual image of the screen caused by its light affecting their eyes is what seeing the screen consists in. These two senses are traditionally characterized by saying that we directly see the visual image, and thereby indirectly see the screen. This indirect realism is readily extended as an account of experience generally; thus, for example, we may distinguish the sound coming out of the speakers from the people's auditory representations, and say that the latter is all they are directly aware of. The basic idea, then, is that images, ideas, representations, phenomenal states, perceptions, experiences – call them what you will – are what we directly experience, and through our awareness of them we indirectly experience their causes.

Many of the great philosophers of the past not only believed this account of experience, but considered it obvious. Thus Hume said that, 'no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences, which we consider, when we say, *this house* and *that tree*, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations

of other existences, which remain uniform and independent'; and Schopenhauer even went so far as to say that, 'no truth is more certain, more independent of all others, and less in need of proof than this, namely that everything that exists for knowledge, and hence the whole of this world, is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word, representation.'⁷ However, few philosophers find indirect realism obvious anymore, for it was the subject of sustained criticism throughout the twentieth century. Consequently it makes sense to ask whether an alternative model of perception is now available, one which would allow us to dispense with visual images and other such experiential representations, and thereby avoid the problem of their lack of fit with objective thought. I do not think there is.

Rejections of the indirect realist model were traditionally motivated by the epistemological concern that any mediated account of our perceptual relationship to the world places us behind an unacceptably problematic 'veil of perception'; a concern that made 'direct' a merit- and 'indirect' a demerit-term in philosophy. This concern makes philosophers keen to reject any suggestion that we see images or ideas. As an observation about ordinary language, it is certainly on solid ground: seeing is something done by human beings using their eyes, and the kinds of things we can see with our eyes are physical objects not mental ideas. To see mental ideas, it seems we would have to use some kind of mystical inner eye instead of the ordinary ones in our eye-sockets, and this sounds bogus; something only philosophers captivated by a theory would ever endorse.

However the direct realism this observation motivates is barely distinguishable from indirect realism, except for its explicitness about rejecting the language of 'seeing ideas'. Thus it is typical to hear it claimed that, 'All that the direct realist must deny is that we *see* (or hear, etc.) experiences or ideas, or sense data, or whatever, not that we have them'. Having the ideas, or being in a visual phenomenological state, are to be identified with directly perceiving; thus 'Being in the phenomenological state *just is* directly perceiving [e.g.] the boy, so long as the phenomenological state is appropriately caused by the boy: for nothing gets in the way, nothing at all'. But this is little more than indirect realism rebranded, because the basic metaphysical picture is still that the perceived object causes an idea, and perceiving the object is having that idea. All that has changed is that we have now insisted on the terminology of 'having' the idea (or 'being in' the phenomenological state) and rejected the terminology of 'seeing' it; although since it was always integral to the indirect realist picture that any sense in which we 'see' an idea is distinct from the sense in which we 'see' physical objects, this amounts to nothing more than the removal of a potential source of confusion. The only real novelty to direct realism of this kind is its rejection of the view that ideas are mental objects. But this was never essential to indirect realism anyway; if direct realism can be this bland, it is plausible to argue that Locke, the archetypal indirect realist, is best interpreted as a direct realist.⁸

But even if we accept that perceptual experiences are not a kind of mental object we see with 'the mind's eye', the fact remains that experiences do still seem to be something we are aware of; it is one thing to make the essentially linguistic point that we do not 'see' our experiences, but quite another to hold that we are completely oblivious to them. To say the latter would thoroughly conflict with ordinary language, for although we do not say that we see experiences, we certainly do say that we feel and are aware

of them; we feel pains, which are experiences, and we are aware of all sorts of vivid experiences, such as the world appearing to spin around when we make ourselves dizzy. Thus most philosophers tend to follow Aristotle, implicitly if not explicitly, in holding that 'It seems that knowing, believing, perceiving and thinking are always of something else, but of themselves on the side', the intuitive idea being that awareness of what we are looking at, for example, is always accompanied 'on the side' by awareness of the experiential state we are in while looking.⁹

But now we have conceded two different senses of awareness, which is just a terminological variation on the indirect realist notion of a direct and indirect sense of seeing. Of course, acknowledging two types of awareness does not require us to describe one as more direct than the other. But given that the model remains one of perceiving objects in virtue of having experiences, talk of directness and indirectness seems as well-motivated as ever. To see this, consider a case where we see an image of Marilyn Monroe on a cinema screen: it certainly seems right to say that we see her indirectly in virtue of seeing the screen; but this case involves an intermediary object, the screen. But now consider the case where we see her in real life: arguably we are still justified in describing this as indirect awareness – even once we have renounced intermediary mental objects – since we see her in virtue of our awareness of the experience she has caused in us, just as in the former case we see her in virtue of our awareness of the screen. Thus the awareness of the experiential state – the introspective awareness we have of the state simply in virtue of being in it – does seem to be acting as an intermediary: just like perceptual awareness of the screen, introspective awareness of the experience seems to be a medium through which we can become perceptually aware of Marilyn Monroe. All that has changed is that we are now refusing to describe introspective awareness as internal seeing.

Thus it seems that the old line of reasoning – the original one behind the indirect realist model – remains unaffected by the rejection of mental objects, and continues to suggest that no model of perception has a right to call itself 'direct' if it depends on self-aware states; that is, states we are aware of – if only 'on the side' – simply in virtue of occupying them. This could be endlessly disputed, however, since 'direct' is a philosophical term of art; there is little more we can do to support it than inconclusively state the intuition that the self-awareness I have of a state of myself seems more direct than any awareness that state could provide of a part of its causal ancestry. However even if this intuition is rejected, and it is held that states of experience do put us in 'direct' touch with the world, the fact remains that any model of perception reliant upon such states will not avoid the problem of consciousness; the ontological problem for objective thought will remain to jeopardise our understanding of reality even if we can secure that understanding from unknown possibilities behind the veil of perception. For self-aware states simply do not belong within objective thought. We can stipulate that certain states of humans are self-aware, such that being in the state is sufficient for being aware of the state; just as we could stipulate this for the internal states of cameras. But nothing in objective thought remotely implies it, because its account of what those states are has nothing to do with 'being in' them.

It seems, then, that indirect realism and self-aware states cannot be easily dispensed with. In fact it is hard to see how self-aware states could ever be avoided at all given

certain basic facts about perception, namely that it is a causally mediated process in which objects affect our sensory receptors and thereby cause a perceptual experience. Suppose we say, plausibly enough, that the perceptual experience is a state of the person perceiving the object. In that case, the person must be aware of whether they are in this kind of state if it is to make them aware of the object; I cannot be oblivious to my experiential state, as I might be oblivious to my financial state, if that state is to alert me to the presence of the object that caused it. But then, if being in states of experience makes us aware of those states – even if we do not think of ourselves as aware of the states but rather of distal objects – then states of experience are self-aware states. That is to say, they are states of a person such that when occupied, the person is aware of the state, and thereby can become aware of the world.

We might try to avoid this conclusion by positing a second-order state that must be related to the experiential state in a certain way if we are to be aware of it.¹⁰ But this would not alter the basic metaphysical predicament, since we are now simply thinking of a more complex objective state comprising both the first- and second-order states as self-aware. Could we avoid self-aware states by denying that the perceived object simply causes the experience, and claiming instead that the object is part of the experience?¹¹ This would not help either, because objective thought would still need to include a self-aware state to account for the fact the object is experienced from the perspective of the perceiver; some portion of objective reality incorporating both the perceiver and the perceived object would now have to count as a self-aware state.

Philosophers often appear to disown such states by insisting on the ‘transparency’, ‘diaphanousness’, or outwardly-directed nature of perception; although on closer inspection it becomes apparent that the point concerns only how we interpret our experiences. Thus, for example, Gilbert Harman says that when you see a tree, ‘you do not experience any features as intrinsic features of your experience’.¹² As an observation about phenomenology this is disputable. Certainly we have a strong inclination to agree in perceptually ideal conditions, such as when looking at a tree from an appropriate distance in broad sunlight; at these times, it does indeed seem that – as J. J. Valberg memorably puts it – ‘All we find is the world’.¹³ But when we look at the tree in the dark, however, we are not so inclined to interpret the inconstant patterns we typically experience as features of the tree. And in any case, regardless of the legitimacy of the phenomenological claim, it bears only on how we *interpret* experience, not *what* we experience. Thus the claim is that when we experience a tree, we think of the features as belonging to the tree. But this is compatible with the features actually belonging to experience; the indirect realist should agree that it is usual to interpret features of our experiences as features of distal objects, but this obviously does not affect their contention that experiencing a tree requires self-awareness of an experience of a tree.

3. Consciousness as the brain: Revisionism

How then can we actually avoid this model, rather than simply tweak it a little and rebrand it? By understanding the awareness involved in perceptual states in a non-experiential manner, and thereby construing the whole process as nothing more than

a complex causal interaction between different parts of the objective world. Thus the truly radical direct realist must say that seeing the screen involves light coming from the screen into a person's eyes, consequent visual processing in their brains . . . and nothing more. This model of perception certainly deserves to be called 'direct', since perceiving an object is now understood as simply a matter of being in a brain state with the right causal history, and there is no longer any requirement that a person's awareness of an object be mediated by introspective self-awareness of their experience. For on this model, there is no experience.

Of course, to say 'there is no experience' is provocative, but the direct realist need not put it this way; they could instead just say that the brain state is the experience. In fact, they need not deny any of the details of the original model: they can agree that objects cause states of perceptual awareness in people, and that these states must be self-aware in order to make people aware of what they represent. However, if they are to present a new model – one which is truly direct and does not trouble objective thought – then they must reinterpret the component features of the original. Thus they must say, for example, that a brain state counts as a perceptual awareness because it causally co-varies with the environment to provide the organism with information used in regulating and guiding motor activities, and that the state counts as self-aware, and thus experiential, because it incorporates different neuronal groups interacting with each other in such a way that the state can aptly be described as monitoring itself. The direct realist can say these kinds of things, then, but they must make it clear – if they are to be candid about their position – that the brain state they are talking about is not what we ordinarily think of as an experience. For when we ordinarily think of an experience we imagine having it; if we think about the visual experience of the person at the back of the cinema, we imagine how the world looks from their perspective, and our intention is to refer to 'that' experience, the one we are imagining. But the direct realist cannot purport to be describing 'that', because then they would have reverted back to the indirect realist model in which our awareness of the world is mediated by introspective awareness.

There are two ways for the direct realist to advertise their position, then; vacillation between them frequently obscures discussion of this view. Either they can adopt the provocative eliminativist line of saying that there are no experiences, only brain states of a certain kind. Or they can say that experiences are not what we ordinarily think they are, and need to be reconceived as brain states of a certain kind. Either way, experiences as we ordinarily think of them are eliminated, and we are left only with organisms in causal relations to their environments. And of course, once we make this move for perceptual experiences, there is every reason to make it for all conscious experiences, with the resultant general eliminativism standing out among all the philosophical positions that have been taken on the nature of experience for the consistency of its adherence to objective thought, and its ability to solve the problem of consciousness without remainder.

The problem with it, however, is that it is very hard to believe; which explains why it has had relatively few advocates. Daniel Dennett has been the most prominent.¹⁴ And the reason it is hard to believe is that the original, indirect realist model primes us to think that our awareness of our own consciousness is more intimate than our

awareness of anything else. As such, denying that consciousness exists seems like a form of madness: like denying the one thing we know best in an inverted parody of Descartes's second meditation. Galen Strawson has summed up this sentiment – felt by many philosophers – by describing consciousness eliminativism as 'surely the strangest thing that has ever happened in the whole history of human thought, not just in the whole history of philosophy'; it is, he says, 'the silliest view ever put forward'.¹⁵

Dennett, however, thinks that consciousness eliminativism – which in line with the softer advertising position might be called 'consciousness revisionism' – is supported by science. Thus he describes a case in which we enter a room and 'see' almost instantly that the walls are covered with hundreds of little pictures of Marilyn Monroe. Science, however, tells us that only one or two could have affected our eyes in the time it takes to form this judgement, and that it is highly unlikely that our brains would engage in the energy-inefficient process of 'filling in' to generate a visual image of hundreds of identical pictures. Rather the best conclusion to draw is that when we claim to have seen all the pictures, we have made a false judgement about consciousness, namely that we have undergone a certain kind of visual experience. However we have made a correct judgement about the world, namely that the walls are covered in Marilyn wallpaper; such judgements are all evolution cares about and consciousness is a product of evolution. Dennett has appealed to many striking cases like this to suggest that our reports of conscious experiences are not to be trusted, with the consequence, he thinks, that objective thought and science have nothing more to account for than the reports themselves.¹⁶

Now Dennett may be right that our judgements about conscious experiences are unreliable, and he may also be right that some of the attempts philosophers have made to characterize them, such as in terms of 'qualia', have been contradictory.¹⁷ However, it is one thing to claim that the reports are unreliable, and another to claim that we are not reporting anything. After all, empirical psychology has amassed evidence to show that many of our ordinary judgements about psychological processes are strikingly inaccurate; memory, for example, routinely involves imaginative reconstruction, with the order of events changed and fictitious detail added.¹⁸ But the latter evidence obviously does not suggest that we are not really reporting past experiences. Dennett, however, is claiming much more than that our reports of experiences are unreliable. To see this, think again of how the world looks from the perspective of somebody at the back of the cinema: if you focus your attention on 'that' experience, the one you are imaging, then Dennett's claim is that you are thereby trying to refer to something which does not exist.

The force of this claim is highlighted by contrasting the way we think about people and machines. Thus suppose there were also a robot at the back of the cinema; one capable of interacting with its environment with a high degree of sophistication, and perhaps even able to make incorrigible reports on its own internal states.¹⁹ We naturally think that the human cinema-goer is in an experiential state with the world appearing to them a certain way, whereas the robot is not; and this distinction seems of obvious significance. And yet the consciousness revisionist of this ilk denies that there is any significant distinction. Consequently we have no reason to think differently about people and machines, on this view, and the question of whether a robot might ever

share our 'inner illumination' is bogus. If we favour the softer advertising position of continuing to talk about 'conscious experiences', then the question of whether we want to label the internal states of the robot this way or not is simply a judgement call, depending on how similar its objective states and abilities are to our own.

The most distinctive feature of this position, then, and the one that makes it the most viable as a solution to the problem of consciousness, is that it does not identify conscious experience as ordinarily understood with objective parts of the world, but rather denies that it exists. However Dennett, for one, is not always as clear about this as he could be. Thus consider the following key passage in *Consciousness Explained*, used at the start of the book to establish that his intuitive grasp of the problem of consciousness is as good as anybody's, and then again at the end to show that his theory has succeeded in explaining consciousness.²⁰ Dennett is rocking in his chair, looking at the trees outside while listening to music – and has a distinctive experience:

Then I noticed that this visual metronome in the tree branches was locked in rhythm with the Vivaldi concerto grosso I was listening to as 'background music' for my reading . . . My conscious thinking, and especially the enjoyment I felt in the combination of sunny light, sunny Vivaldi violins, rippling branches – plus the pleasure I took in just thinking about it all – how could *all that* be just something physical happening in my brain? How could any combination of electromagnetic happenings in my brain somehow add up to the delightful way those hundreds of twigs genuflected in time with the music? How could some information-processing event in my brain *be* the delicate warmth of the sunlight I felt falling on me?²¹

Dennett then proceeds to explain that 'No such "plenum" ever came into his mind', and that although it seemed that he was having a conscious experience with all these details, 'this was an illusion'; all that really happened was that he formed the correct judgement that certain features existed in the world – just as in the wallpaper case you form the correct judgement that there are hundreds of Marilyn pictures without actually experiencing them.²²

So far so good; but then Dennett proceeds, echoing a famous remark by Wittgenstein, to answer his original rhetorical questions with another, namely: 'Well, what do you think it would seem like if it *were* just a combination of electrochemical happenings in your brain?'²³ The problem with this is that the 'it' – just like the '*all that*' in his earlier rhetorical question – strongly suggests that reference is being made to conscious experience; it is hard to see what else 'it' could refer to in this context except for the phenomenology Dennett is officially denying the existence of. And this gets to the heart of the difficulty with the revisionist position, which is that no matter how well-supported its rejection of consciousness as ordinarily conceived might be, such rejections will inevitably be made in the apparent presence of consciousness. Our most sincere denials that 'that' exists will not make 'that' go away. This point is not the disingenuous one that we need only pinch ourselves to recognize the manifest falsity of the revisionist position; Dennett is obviously aware that we feel pain, just as Berkeley was aware that rocks are solid.²⁴ Rather, the point is that even when enlightened by the revisionist position, our inclination to make false judgements about consciousness is

bound to continue no matter how often we correct it; which suggests that consciousness has not been adequately described.

To see this, imagine a parallel situation we might describe by invoking systematic false judgements. Thus suppose everybody has the systematic inclination to judge that there is a tree in a certain place; when they look in that direction they apparently see it, when they walk in that direction they apparently bump into it, and so on. However powerful theoretical considerations suggest there can be no such tree. In order to reconcile the manifest evidence with the theoretical considerations, the revisionist proposes that people are subject to systematic false judgements; nobody sees or feels a tree, they just falsely judge that they do. If this is accepted, people will continue to apparently see and bump into a tree, but they will now explicitly say that they only *apparently* do so. However an adequate description of the situation has yet to be provided given that we have not explained why everyone seems to see and feel a tree when there is nothing there. The natural way to rectify this would be to invoke an alternative explanation; thus perhaps everybody has been hypnotized, or there is a strange force-field that causes them to hallucinate in certain circumstances. And now we would indeed have an adequate description, since we would have explained people's systematic inclination to falsely judge that there is a tree, in terms of extraneous conditions which cause them to have experiences as-of a tree.

This final move, however, is not open to the revisionist about consciousness. They cannot explain why we seem to be aware of conscious experiences in the same way we might explain why we seem to be aware of the tree – namely by invoking illusory experiences – since this would immediately undermine their denial of experience. In the tree case, we explain how things seem in terms of experience: experience is the fallible basis for our judgements about how the world is. But the revisionist about consciousness must reject this account of seeming, and replace it with bare judgement: how things seem is not how experience presents the world as being, but is rather simply whatever we judge.²⁵ But then if this is accepted, our persistent inclination to judge that we are having experiences can be nothing more than a dumb reflex, rather than a rational if ultimately misguided response to the evidence. This is because – as Dennett continually emphasizes – the objective world lacks any evidence for the existence of experience: it is this fact, after all, which generates the problem of consciousness in the first place. Thus, for example, when I make myself dizzy, I am strongly inclined to judge that I am having a visual experience in which the world seems to spin around. But this inclination necessarily lacks any rational explanation on the revisionist model, because that model denies that there are any dizzy experiences – or anything similar that might be mistaken for one – to provide the evidential basis of my false judgement. As such, my inclination to judge that I am having experiences seems baseless and inexplicable, rather than based on any kind of 'illusion', as Dennett puts it.²⁶

Consider a standard case of systematic illusion: a visual illusion such as the Müller-Lyer, in which we continue to see two lines as looking of unequal length even when we know they are equal. Here we explain our inclination to make a false judgement (which we can easily override) by the fact that the lines *look* unequal; the drawing is designed to resemble situations where we really would be viewing unequal lines. In this case, the visual experience provides the evidential basis which inclines us to make

a false judgement. But in the case of my judgement that I am having a dizzy experience, the revisionist can provide no evidential basis. For if there is no experience – and as a sold-up revisionist I also judge there is no experience – it makes no rational sense for me to retain the enduring inclination to judge that there is. Note that this is not the inclination to judge that there is a disturbance in my vestibular system, or that I ought not to try doing anything requiring manual dexterity for a while – or even the inclination to falsely judge that I am still spinning around even after I have stepped off the roundabout; any of these might make sense on the revisionist picture. Rather the enduring inclination is to judge that I am having a certain kind of experience. But if I am not, and there is nothing in the objective world that I could mistake for an experience, then this inclination can have no rational basis, and must rather be an automatic and senseless reaction. This, however, is not how it strikes us at all: it is not as though I inexplicably find myself wanting to spout the words ‘I’m having an experience’ without knowing why; as if believing we have experiences were like suffering from Tourette’s syndrome.

If our inclination to judge that we undergo experiences has no evidential basis, and can persist even once we accept the revisionist view, then this seems just as bizarre and rationally inexplicable as would be a persistent inclination to judge that Casablanca is the capital of Morocco even once you know fully well that Rabat is. The problem, to sum up, is that if the revisionist is right that experience does not exist, then they need to provide some rational basis for our persistent inclination to judge that it does; an inclination which even Dennett shows himself subject to when he considers the possibility that the experiential ‘it’ is a state of his brain. Without this basis, the consciousness revisionist position parallels the tree case before we add an explanation of why people are inclined to judge that there is a tree. Thus just as it would be arbitrary and implausible to suppose that people’s rational lives might systematically be interrupted by the evidentially baseless urge to utter sentences such as ‘I see a tree’, it would be equally arbitrary and implausible to suppose that our enduring inclination to utter sentences such as ‘I am having a dizzy experience’ is of this baseless kind. Revisionism fails, then, because it does not explain how we might reasonably believe that consciousness exists even if it does not.

But did not science support the view? The evidence shows, for instance, that when a person has an experience of the Marilyn wallpaper, their experience does not bear the causal imprint of all the pictures. But this only shows that experience is a fallible guide to the world; which is ancient wisdom. It does not show that experience does not exist; given that experience apparently has no place within the objective world anyway, it is no less plausible that an experiential array of Marilyns should exist with or without causal links to each picture. And even if causal links were required for the reality of an experience – which would be an odd requirement given the existence of dreams and hallucinations – there might still exist one or two self-aware images from which we instinctively jump to conclusions. To show that experience does not exist you would need an alternative evidential basis for our inclination to judge that it does. But the kind of evidence Dennett invokes is only capable of explaining our inclination to make judgements about the world, not our experiences; evolutionary considerations might explain why we judge that hundreds of pictures exist even though only a couple have

causally affected us, but not why we judge that an experience of hundreds of pictures exists even though there is no such thing.

If philosophy 'leaves everything as it is', as Wittgenstein said, then revisionism was always a non-starter: since it requires us to massively rethink our lives.²⁷ Consider somebody contemplating death and instinctively recoiling from the awful prospect of eternal experiential nothingness. The revisionist is asking this person to bring themselves around to the view that they are already in a state of experiential nothingness, and that death means something quite different, such as loss of motor function and ability to emit sentences – none of which sounds nearly so bad unless you make the mistake of imagining it experientially. In order to defend objective thought, as they see it at least, the revisionist goes too far.

4. Consciousness as the brain: From identification to revisionism

But maybe there is no need to deny the existence of experience; maybe we can simply identify it with a part of the objective world. Thus we might imagine the experience of the cinema-goer and say that 'that' – the screen as viewed from the person's perspective – is the same thing as the person's brain at that particular moment; this would fit conscious experience squarely into the objective scene without any need to deny that it exists.

This has been the mainstream approach to the problem in analytic philosophy, with only a few like Dennett taking the more radical line. But the radicals are right to the extent that revisionism provides the only realistic prospect of finding something to call 'consciousness' in the world of objective thought. Overt revisionism is highly implausible and metaphilosophically overstretches itself, but it could still be true: it might be the case that we have a built-in and evidentially baseless inclination to judge that we are undergoing experiences. But although it seems as if there is a more straightforward and plausible alternative in the mainstream approach, on closer inspection this turns out to be chimerical.

The reason we cannot simply identify experiences with brain states is nicely summed up by Bishop Butler's memorable sentence: 'Everything is what it is, and not another thing.'²⁸ For a brain state is one thing and an experience is another; they cannot be the same any more than an apple can be a banana. To avoid this obvious objection, the influential tactic originated by U. T. Place and J. J. C. Smart in the 1950s was to argue that we have two sets of descriptions for the same thing, making the mind-brain case akin to Frege's example of talking about Venus as both the Morning Star and Evening Star.²⁹ However in the Frege case there is no problem in ascribing the properties of both the Morning and Evening Star to Venus: the same planet appears in the morning and evening. All such cases are equally unproblematic: water has the same properties as H₂O and Marilyn Monroe has the same properties as Norma Jeane Baker. In the mind-brain case, however, brain states and experiences apparently have entirely different properties, so their being the same seems out of the question. A brain state is a temporal snapshot of an organ: a snapshot of nerve cells located in the head of a

living human being, that is, those nerve cells at a certain time. A conscious experience, on the other hand, is conceived as a self-aware visual image: it is the 'that' you imagine when you put yourself in the place of someone in the cinema. In short, a brain state is a brain state, and not another thing such as a visual image.

Place's tactic for avoiding this objection was to argue that our conceptions of conscious experiences are less committal about their properties than we might suppose, and are in fact based only on their functional role; he was developing B. A. Farrell's earlier suggestion that experience is 'featureless'.³⁰ Thus we do not think of the cinema experience as a visual image, for instance, but rather just as something which occurs when I sit in a cinema with my eyes directed at the screen; it is something which occupies a certain role in my life. If this were right then the identification could go ahead without a hitch, because these kinds of anodyne properties could readily be attributed to brain states. The problem, however, and the underlying reason why functional analyses have been a focus of controversy since their inception, is that our conception of conscious experience is not remotely this anodyne.

Thus Place, speaking of the kind of visual image we might experience after staring at a bright green light and then closing our eyes, says that 'when we describe the after-image as green, we are not saying that there is something, the after-image, which is green'.³¹ However, it is hard to imagine anyone claiming this without a vested interest in reconciling consciousness with objective thought, because suitably qualified, this is precisely what we are saying: when making this kind of report we are fully committed to the existence of something of which we are aware. Once we reflect on the matter, we will find ourselves unable to think of it as something in the objective world, of course, because we know that there is no green patch hovering behind our eyes. But we do nevertheless continue to think of the after-image as part of a visual array; whatever that might be. Moreover we think of the after-image as green; again on reflection we may realize that it cannot be 'green' in the same sense we use to describe a patch of light, but we continue to think of it as 'green' in the sense that an experience caused by a patch of light can be green; whatever that might be.

Nevertheless the positive part of Place's account is still right, namely that we conceive the after-image as 'the sort of experience which we normally have when [...] looking at a green patch of light'.³² However this under-describes the situation, and thereby conveniently leaves out most of the properties which cause the problems for objective thought. Most but not all, because he says 'the sort of experience', and thereby overlooks the fact that this in itself commits him to properties alien to objective thought; since to describe something as an 'experience' implies that it has the property of being an awareness of the world from a perspective, something you might internally demonstrate as 'that'. Smart avoided this mistake by saying instead that 'there is something going on' of the kind which goes on when we look at green light.³³ But this just under-describes the situation further, since the 'something' is evidently experiential; if it were not we would not know about it, as we do not know about various other goings-on within our bodies.

Thus we conceive experiences as possessed of properties brain states lack; and if we are conceiving them as they are, then, they cannot be the same. It does not help, as many philosophers have thought it might, to hold that experiential properties are

irreducible, and thus akin to large-scale social properties such as economic inflation. Nobody in their right mind would think we could reduce inflation to movements of physical particles, so goes the thought, but since this does not incline us to think inflation cannot be part of the objective world, maybe there is no reason to think brain states lack experiential properties after all; maybe they are just irreducible properties of brains. But reducibility was never the issue. We do not think inflation is reducible, but we still think it is part of the objective world: it is a large-scale way of talking about ordinary objects and their interactions, namely people exchanging goods and services. The case of consciousness is different, however, because the reason we do not think it is reducible is that it does not seem to be part of the objective world. As such we think people could be physically different but have the same experiences *not* because we think of experiences as functional states which are multiply realizable by different physical states, as in Hilary Putnam's functionalist theory of mind, but rather because we do not think the existence of any physical state is enough to 'realize' an experiential state. For no matter what scale we conceive the world at, whether microscopic or macroscopic, we still conceive it as objective, and hence not as something that experientially appears to the bearer of the state, thereby allowing them to internally demonstrate it as 'that'.³⁴

A more recent attempt to show that experiences can be identified with brain states has been to abandon functional analyses, and hold that we conceive conscious states directly in virtue of the physical properties they have as brain states.³⁵ Thus if we conceive the after-image as green, for instance, the property of greenness we ascribe is just a physical property of the brain state, such as a certain neuronal configuration. Of course, we do not ordinarily conceive the greenness as a neuronal configuration, but according to this proposal the reason is because we have both a perceptual and introspective concept of that property. Thus just because we have different concepts, so the thought goes, we should not conclude that we are conceiving different things, or even the same thing in virtue of its possession of different properties; since we can explain the difference between the concepts cognitively, in terms of the different classificatory roles they play.

There is a clear problem with this proposal, however. Part of our conception of the after-image is, say, that it is green and oblong with fuzzy edges. If we are actually conceptualizing a brain state, then, we must have formed a radically false conception of it, given that it is not green and oblong with fuzzy edges.³⁶ But if the proposal holds that our conceptions of experiences are radically false, then it seems the idea cannot be that experiences are brain states, but rather that the whole idea of an experience is just a misconception; given that the objective world is all that exists and nothing within it fits our idea of an experience. Since nothing fits our idea of an experience, then, if we want to keep the label 'experience', we will have to reapply it to something objective, such as a brain state. And this is just revisionism once more.

The advocate of this position, commonly known as the 'Phenomenal Concept Strategy', will respond that we are failing to make allowance for the difference between perceptually- and introspectively-based concepts. Thus Brian Loar says that we must distinguish the grasp of essence of a brain property provided by a physical concept, which 'structurally analyses the property' and 'reveal[s] how it is internally constituted', from the grasp of essence provided by an introspective or 'phenomenal' concept of

that same property; which simply refers to it directly, rather than via its accidental properties. But this response forgets what it means to have a *concept* of something. My concept of a tree is what I believe the tree to be: it is how I think of it. It is true that I can have a false conception of a tree and yet still manage to refer to it; just as I can refer to a man at a party as the one drinking a martini even if he is drinking water.³⁷ However even a false conception presents my conception of what the thing is; the Phenomenal Concept Strategy cannot exempt introspective concepts of this basic requirement simply by insisting on the cognitive distinctiveness of introspection. Loar tries to do exactly this, however, by claiming that experiential concepts are recognitional, demonstrative concepts. But even our most ephemeral concepts of this kind – such as of smells and feelings we have come across before without knowing exactly what they are – embody some conception of what we are talking about. My concept of ‘that’ smell is still the concept of a *smell*: an experiential state which I might describe as pleasant or musty, for instance, and thereby distinguish it from other smells, non-olfactory sensations, parts of the objective world and so on.

Our concepts of experiences, then, provide our conception of what experiences are, and since brain states lack most of the properties we ascribe to experiences, we must conclude that if they are concepts of brain states, we are radically misconceiving brain states. Thus the Phenomenal Concept Strategy ultimately issues in a misrepresentation view: a view according to which concepts of experiences are misrepresentations of brain states. These misrepresentations might still refer to brain states, however, since the misrepresentation need not be complete; on the most plausible development of this suggestion, our concepts of experiences might refer to brain states in virtue of their functional properties, since we conceive experiences and brain states as having similar functional properties.³⁸ Similarly, somebody might radically misconceive the sun by thinking of it as a systematic hallucination; but if the supposed hallucination played a similar functional role to the sun, their concept might succeed in referring to the sun, even though no hallucination of the kind exists. The advocate of this view, then, might claim to have found a way of avoiding revisionism and showing that experiences are brain states, by holding that concepts of experiences refer to brain states while radically misrepresenting them.

The problem, however, is that if our concepts of experiences are misrepresentations of brain states, then all that exists is the centreless objective world. We should not, then, be imagining somebody focusing on their experience of the world from a certain perspective, and thinking of ‘that’ as an experience, even though what they are really focusing on is a brain state. We should not be imagining this because if the proposal were correct, there would be no experiential ‘that’ to either accurately represent or misrepresent. Rather, the situation would be one in which a person would utter certain sentences, and be disposed to utter others, about the nature of their experience. Those sentences would refer to their brain state in virtue of the brain state possessing the functional role ascribed by the sentences, but the sentences would otherwise provide a completely false description of the brain state. The person would say that something was experientially present to them, then, but in reality there would be nothing of the sort; just an organism misdescribing its internal states, and on the basis of those misdescriptions falsely believing itself to be fundamentally unlike inanimate objects

in virtue of having a conscious perspective on the world. The organism would think there was an experiential 'that' but there would not be; it would just be misrepresenting its brain state. Ultimately, then, the misrepresentation view is not distinct from revisionism; it just finds a functional commonality between experiences and brain states to justify its revisionist labelling of certain brain states as 'experiences'.³⁹

In fact, the potential for mind-brain identification theories to slide into revisionism was latent even in the original version of the theory put forward by Place. For if we hold, as Place did, that the only accurate component of our conception of a conscious state is of its functional role, then the rest must be a misrepresentation and we are again effectively proposing a revisionist conception of experience. Place did not say he was seeking to revise our conception of consciousness, but rather that when we conceive the green after-image, '*we are not saying* [my emphasis] that there is something, the after-image, which is green': this might be read as a suggestion ('we should not say this') or an observation ('we do not ordinarily mean to say this'). If he meant the former, the implications are plainly revisionist. The latter is implausible, but even if Place were right, he would still have to concede that there is a concept of consciousness which does conflict with objective thought; otherwise the origins of our vast literature on the mind-body problem would be a bigger mystery than the problem itself. But then this problematic conception would still need revision. So either way, the result is a centreless objective world and a revisionist conception of experience.

Attempts to identify consciousness with the brain inevitably gravitate towards revisionism, then, but not necessarily to revisionism about *consciousness*; for it might be possible for experience as ordinarily conceived to be identified with the brain in the circumstance in which a future scientific revolution transforms our conception of matter – or perhaps goes beyond the concept of matter. This is because such a revolution might completely overthrow objective thought, or else supplement it in such a way that we become able to understand how objective states of the world could have experiential self-awareness. This suggestion, common to Thomas Nagel and Galen Strawson, avoids the need to revise our conception of consciousness by postulating future revisions to our conception of a brain state. But just like standard revisionism, it is implausible and metaphilosophically overstretches itself.⁴⁰

As a prediction about what will take place in the future, it is implausible both because the world has no track record of metaphysical problems instigating scientific revolutions; and because it is practically impossible to imagine philosophers persuading physicists to take the problem seriously enough for them to build up the kind of major research programme required (to go nowhere); the voices of philosophers such as Dennett would have to have disappeared, for a start. But perhaps the proposal is not to be read so much as a prediction, as a statement of what would have to happen for the problem of consciousness to be solved. If this is the case, however, then it metaphilosophically overstretches itself. For philosophers are in no position to pontificate on the inadequacy of our conception of matter; this is a concern which long ago passed into the hands of empirical science. And besides the inadvisability of philosophers stepping into core scientific territory as anything more than interested bystanders – unless of course they become scientists themselves – the fact remains that in a contest between our ordinary conception of consciousness and objective thought,

objective thought wins hands down. Objective thought provides the foundation for all our understanding of the world, and cannot be put in doubt by a philosophical problem. If revisionism is necessary, then, it is Dennett who takes it in the more sensible direction, that is, towards experience rather than matter.

We have found that all attempts to identify consciousness with the brain ultimately result in revisionism. It must do, because our conception of an experience is nothing like our conception of a brain state, and everything is what it is and not another thing. One concept or the other will have to be revised if what they conceive is identical. Thus if experiences are brain states, our conception of either experiences or brain states must be more or less completely wrong. Is it possible to reach a more satisfying conclusion? Only if we keep in mind the subject-matter of philosophy.