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Consciousness: The Transcendent Hypothesis

It is better that philosophy fail to totalize meaning – even though, as ontology, it has attempted just this – for it thereby remains open to the irreducible otherness of transcendence.

Emmanuel Levinas, 1981₁

1. Consciousness and transcendence

We have seen that attempts to find conscious experience in the objective world by identifying it with brain activity inevitably gravitate towards revisionism: revisionism of either our concept of consciousness or our concept of the brain. However suppose, *per impossibile*, that experiences were brain states: that they were somehow what they are *and* another thing. In that case the self-awareness of our experiences would be the self-awareness of our brains, and there would be a sense in which we are only ever aware of our brains; experience would be the self-awareness of our current brain state, with some states representing their external causes to make us indirectly aware of the world. Even perceptual awareness of our own brains, on this model, would be the brain's self-awareness; which is why Bradley thought it a consequence of naturalism that, 'for me my own brain in the end must be a state of my own brain.'² Thus if experience is the brain, the brain must be reconceived as akin to a self-aware cinema screen: aware only of its own pictures and in virtue of this self-awareness indirectly aware of what the pictures depict. It becomes a unique object, narcissistically peering at itself while interpreting what it sees as the world.

This strange metaphysical vision would be an unavoidable consequence of locating experience in the objective world. It is strange because it makes the brain as metaphysically unique as experience; brains become uniquely self-aware and uniquely capable of appearing as whatever causally affected them in the right way, by contrast with the rest of the world, which is unable to appear either to itself or as another thing. However we know from objective thought that the brain is not radically unlike everything else in the world; it is the most complex organ in the human body and the one science currently knows least about, but it is nevertheless still just a physical object,

metaphysically on a par with any other. Any satisfactory solution to the problem of consciousness, then, must respect this fact, for there is no sense trying to do justice to objective thought by accommodating experience within it, if what it tells us about the world, and specifically our brains, is thereby ignored in the process.

If we want to leave objective thought's conception of the world alone then, maybe our best option would be to just accept that experience does not belong there; this is the thinking behind dualism. For if consciousness occupies a parallel reality, then its puzzling properties can simply be treated as basic features of this reality; the self-awareness of consciousness, for instance, can be given an exotic label such as 'non-thetic consciousness', and then nothing more needs to be said to explain it.³ Granted, the resulting picture is not altogether different from the one we had before, for the mind is still portrayed as a unique object narcissistically peering at itself. However once banished to a non-physical reality, this strangeness might no longer seem to matter, so long as objective thought is left intact. But it is not left intact; for if consciousness is excluded from the objective world, its manifest integration with that world needs to be accounted for. Thus the dualist must attribute to the brain a unique capacity to interact with the non-physical world, which is another kind of metaphysical specialness; once more metaphysics finds itself forced to tamper with objective thought's conception of the world.

How then can we hope to avoid this impasse? How can we avoid revisionism, while leaving the objective world alone? To start to see a way out, let us return to the metaphilosophy of Chapter 3. Thus let us suppose that the issue of natural interest which attracts people to the problem of consciousness is that of transcendence; that people are fascinated by consciousness, at first at least, because the apparent mystery of it raises the prospect that reality transcends the objective world. And correlatively, let us suppose that no proposed solution to the problem can establish any kind of lasting consensus unless it relates to this motivating interest in transcendence; that the implicit parameters for an answer to the problem are such that any acceptable answer must have implications for whether or not reality transcends the world of objective thought.

In that case, we are looking for a solution which – at a minimum – tells us whether or not reality transcends the objective world. Let us begin by supposing it does not. If that is so, then the objective world is the final context of existence. And if it is, and hence there is nothing else (concrete) to reality, it follows that if experience exists, a place must be found for it within the objective world. This is the assumption most contemporary philosophers make. However it leads to revisionism.

So let us instead try supposing that reality *does* transcend the objective world. This suggestion has long been unpopular since it smacks of supernaturalism, religious hypotheses and immodest metaphilosophy. Worse still, the most popular way of pursuing it has been through dualism. However, the kind of transcendence that dualism appeals to is weaker than the full-blown version which has fascinated religions and philosophies since ancient times. For while dualism holds that reality transcends the objective world because minds, or mental properties, are non-spatial, this mental reality is not a wider context of existence; the existence of non-physical minds does not imply that the objective world depends for its existence on this reality. Rather dualism

only commits us to a counterpart of the objective world within the same context of existence. If the objective world were transcended by a wider context of existence, then according to the only concrete model of transcendence we have which could apply to this case, the wider context would have to stand to the objective world as the objective world stands to a dream. But in that case the dualist's reality of thoughts and feelings would also be transcended, showing that they belong to the same context as the objective world. Suppose this is a dream. In that case not only are the dream-trees I see transcended by the wider context in which I am asleep; my dream-thoughts must be as well. For any reality there is to the thoughts and feelings we have in a dream must be found in the real world, not the world of the dream.

The sense in which dualism holds that reality transcends the objective world, then, is just that there is more to concrete reality than the objective world. But there is also a stronger sense based on the phenomenological model of waking from a dream. The weaker sense is no help with the problem of consciousness; dualism is, and always has been, stricken by the problem of explaining how an ontologically distinct mind and body could interact. But what if we employ the genuine article?

2. The problem in a dream

Suppose I am currently dreaming. If this is a dream, then I am not really sitting at my desk typing these words. Rather, I am lying asleep in my bed (or at least I am asleep somewhere and my bed seems the most likely option). Thus the hands I see before me are not my real hands. Rather they are dream-hands. They are not real hands because they exist within the consciousness of my dream, just like the dream-desk and dream-trees I see; like them, the hands I currently see belong to a different context of existence from that of waking reality.

Now suppose that within my dream I think about the problem of consciousness. I focus my attention on my current experience and then begin to be puzzled by the question of how it fits into the objective scene I am apparently part of. Objective thought provides me with a conception of the room I am in, a room containing various objects composed of various materials; what then puzzles me is that experience seems to have no place within that room. Nonetheless I am convinced that experience must somehow be there, so I fixate on the old philosophical hypothesis that my conscious states are states of my brain. But now I become even more puzzled, because this does not seem possible unless I adopt an implausible revisionist conception of experience.

This thought-process is of course the one we went through in the last chapter; but the supposition that this is a dream alters its significance. Consider the stage when I suppose my experiences must be states of my brain. What is problematic about this is that my conception of a brain is of an organic object; something which unlike experience is at home within objective thought. As such when I think about both the grey matter inside my skull and my present experience of a tree, there seems absolutely no question of numerical identity. If this is a dream rather than reality, however, then there is an ambiguity in the reasoning here – an ambiguity J. J. Valberg has revealed – which makes it likely that I am thinking about the wrong brain.⁴ For there is no

prospect of my conscious experience being identified with *the brain within the dream*. Rather if I am to consider identifying my experience with any brain, then it must be the real one outside the dream: the one located close to the pillow on my bed, and which is responsible for the dream world I am currently immersed in.

If this is a dream, then, the usual thought-process I go through in thinking about the problem of consciousness is liable to be confused, unless I deliberately adjust it to take account of differential contexts of existence. For I would be confused if I began wondering how my experience fits into the scene, if the scene is part of a dream world. If I want to think about the problem of consciousness from within my dream, then, I need to think about it differently. I should not be wondering about how my experience fits into the world of the dream, but rather how it fits into the objective world outside the dream. Moreover I should not be considering identifications between my dream experiences and my dream-brain, but rather identifications between my dream experiences and the states of the brain doing the dreaming, that is, the one within my real, sleeping head.

This difference might initially seem of no great consequence, given that whether I am currently having waking or dream experiences they are experiences all the same; and it is experience *simpliciter*, not a particular kind of experience, which has no place within objective thought. And indeed, there is no more prospect of identifying brain states with dream experiences than waking ones. However the importance of the dreaming hypothesis to the problem of consciousness is this: if this is a dream, then it would be a mistake to try to identify my experience with a part of the world that exists within the context of existence presented by my consciousness. Thus it would be a mistake to try to identify my experience with my dream-brain, and if I convinced myself that this identity must hold, I would be liable to become very puzzled indeed. Rather, if my experience is to be identified with anything, it must be identified with something within a wider context of existence. Might we not reach an equivalent conclusion when we consider the problem in ordinary waking life?

The equivalent conclusion would be that conscious experience must be identified with something within a wider context of existence than the world it presents: it must be identified with something transcendent to the objective world. If this is right, it would explain why consciousness apparently has no place within the objective world. The reason would be that it does not exist there, any more than dream experience exists in the world of the dream. It would also explain why experiences cannot be identified with brain states. The reason would be that experiences exist in a context transcendent to the objective world in which brain states belong, making such an identity out of the question; just as an identity between a dream experience and a state of a dream-brain would be out of the question.

This is the transcendent hypothesis – that the objective, physical world is transcended – and it provides the basis for a metaphysical description of the world which leaves objective thought and thus the brain alone; while relating to transcendence and incorporating the existence of experience. Objective thought and the brain are left alone because once experience is conceived as transcendent, there is no need to try to incorporate it into the world of objective thought, thereby transforming the brain into a uniquely self-aware object. The brain can again be an ordinary object with the

same status as any other in the objective world, just as a dream-brain enjoys the same status as everything else in the world of a dream. And if experience has transcendent existence, and thus its existence is compatible with objective thought, then the pressure to deny it is removed. Revisionism is avoided. Overall, then, this looks like a solution of the right shape. But what does it amount to? And is it true?

Before we start to answer these questions, however, we shall first provide a more precise account of the concept of transcendence we are employing, since this might be helpful in following the argument to come.

Transcendence is a relation of either ontological dependency between worlds presented by consciousness and the independently existing world; or apparent ontological dependency between different worlds presented by consciousness (a 'context of existence' is either a world presented by consciousness or the independently existing world). So a world is transcended when there is another world upon which the entire space and time (or apparent space and time) of the former is apparently or actually ontologically dependent; the latter is the transcendent world relative to the former. The ontological dependency will be merely apparent when the transcendent world is a world which exists within consciousness (which consciousness presents). This is because the apparent ontological dependency will itself be something which consciousness presents, and there can only be actual ontological dependency upon independent existence; a world presented by consciousness cannot independently exist, since consciousness cannot belong to a world that it presents (we have already seen this in the case of both dreams (above) and the objective world (Chapter 4)) and yet must belong to the world which independently exists. The ontological dependency will be actual when the transcendent world is not a world which exists within consciousness (which consciousness presents), because it is the world in which consciousness independently exists. The ontological dependency will be actual in this case because the conscious presentation of the transcended world exists independently in the transcendent world.

3. The transcendent hypothesis I: Two traditional themes

There is an important disanalogy between trying to locate dreaming and waking experiences in the objective world, because in dreams it only makes sense to identify experience with something outside the dream. Thus an identification of dream experiences with something in the objective world is at least possible, although it is ruled out by the contingent fact that experience has no place in the objective world. However if we work on the assumption that dreams provide insight into how consciousness works in general – namely by creating differential contexts of existence with the experience existing in the wider context – then we should conclude that there was never any prospect of identifying waking experiences with objective brain states, given that these states exist *within* our consciousness of the objective world, not outside it.

If dream experience shows that consciousness creates differential contexts of existence, we have reason to believe that the objective world is not the final context. This is because the fact that we are conscious of the objective world indicates that another context transcends it: the one where consciousness exists. Just as consciousness of a dream world requires a world transcendent to the dream, so does consciousness of the objective world require a world transcendent to the objective world. On the transcendent hypothesis, then, the final context of existence transcends the objective world; and since the final context is the independently existing world, this must be the world to which all experience belongs, whether dreaming or waking. Thus according to the hypothesis, dream experiences exist in a context which transcends the world of the dream, but this is one step removed from the objective world. This extra step provides the clue to the nature of consciousness on which the hypothesis is based, and roots its sense in the objective world.

The transcendent context of existence being hypothesized is one of which our knowledge is seriously curtailed. This is because we have no reason to regard it as a context we could ever be conscious of, given that there is no evidence for further 'waking' to a transcendent world; we awaken from dreams but there is no reason to believe we will ever awaken from life.⁵ Thus if there is a context of existence which transcends the objective world, it is not one, so far as we know, which exists within consciousness. And if it did exist within consciousness, it would not be the final context, since consciousness, according to the hypothesis, is always transcendent. This removes any realistic prospect of identifying experiences with particular parts of the transcendent world, since the transcendent reality of the final context – in which independent being is to be found – is not something we could consciously experience in such a way as to allow us to distinguish one part of it from another. For although we must suppose there is a world outside of a dream where dream experiences exist, we need not suppose it is a world of which we are even potentially conscious; there could be a dreamer incapable of waking, for instance. And likewise if we suppose there is a world transcendent to the objective world, this need not be a world of which we can be conscious either; once we get to the final context, it could not be.

However, although there is a sense in which we are not conscious of transcendent reality, there must also be a sense in which we are; given that we are aware of consciousness and consciousness is transcendent. Awareness of conscious experiences is not perceptual awareness of the kind we have of the objective world, nor the quasi-perceptual awareness we have of objects in a dream. Rather we are aware of experiences in virtue of having them – conscious experiences are conceived as self-aware. If conscious experiences are part of transcendent reality, then, it seems we must have self-awareness of transcendent reality. This is something we readily accept in dreams. For since dream experiences must exist in a world that transcends the dream, the self-awareness we have of these experiences must be of a world transcending the dream. What the hypothesis suggests, then, is that the same holds of all experience, and hence that the self-awareness we have of our waking experiences is of a reality which transcends the objective world.

Thus the transcendent hypothesis seems to be saying that conscious experience is a transcendent reality we have self-awareness of, and it is in virtue of this

self-awareness that we are perceptually aware of the objective world. Understood in this way, it immediately jars with two major themes in the history of philosophy; the first that transcendent reality is humanly unknowable, and the second that experience is perfectly knowable. Once these themes are combined, the hypothesis begins to look like a thoroughly problematic hybrid, since it claims that experiences – which are supposed to be perfectly known – exist in a transcendent reality – which is supposed to be perfectly unknown. However, correctly understood, the implication of the hypothesis is rather that transcendent reality is very well known as the objective world, but very imperfectly known as experience. To see this, let us address the traditional themes in turn.

The idea that transcendent reality is humanly unknowable derives, in modern times at least, from Kant's transcendental idealism. However to say that Kantian idealism is committed to unknowable things-in-themselves is misleading. It is correct given the strict Kantian definition of knowledge; but this conveys the false impression of a separate world hermetically sealed off from us. If we speak instead of 'awareness', however, it is clear that if the transcendent reality of things-in-themselves is independent reality, then all awareness is of things-in-themselves: there is nothing else to be aware of. And if we forget about Kantian knowledge, it seems clear there is nothing else to know either. Kant's transcendent reality of things-in-themselves is not a distinct reality, but independent reality considered 'as it is in itself'; rather than in relation to our senses or conceptual apparatus. The Kantian idealist tradition provides no theoretical obstacle to claiming that we are aware of transcendent reality, then. Rather, it purports only to show that we cannot be aware of transcendent reality as it is in itself.⁶

So if reality is transcendent, we are certainly aware of it. But the question is whether this awareness allows us to understand its independent nature as it is in itself. The transcendent hypothesis suggests that perceptual awareness of the objective world does not provide this understanding, because we have no reason to expect theories built up within consciousness to apply outside of it; any more than we should trust theories devised within a dream to capture the independent nature of the world outside the dream. But even if our conception of the objective world does not capture the nature of independent reality, our conception of consciousness still might. For if conscious experience transcends the objective world, and we have self-knowledge of experience, this must be self-knowledge of transcendent reality. Perhaps, then, it is this self-knowledge which allows us to grasp reality's independent nature as it is in itself. This brings us to the second traditional theme: the idea that experience is perfectly known.

On the face of it, this suggestion seems unlikely, given how little we can say about what experience is. If I want to tell you what the experience of green is, for instance, I have but three very inadequate options: I can compare it to another colour experience; tell you how to get it so you can find out for yourself; or say some very general, philosophical things, such as that it is a subjective state that alerts people to the presence of green light. None of this remotely compares to the detailed knowledge that can be imparted about things in the objective world. If all I could tell you about trees, for instance, was that they are like bushes, can be seen in forests ('go and have a look!'), and that they are physical objects which cause experiences of trees, then you

would likely conclude that I knew very little about trees. Moreover if consciousness transcends the objective world, as the objective world transcends dreams, we have a much stronger reason to be sceptical about it being peculiarly well known.

Despite this, the view that the mind is better known than the physical world has been highly influential; it was weakened by Kant, and came in for sustained criticism from Wittgenstein, but it still regularly resurfaces to dominate philosophical discussion.⁷ It is encouraged by the idea of directness, since if experience is unique in being known directly, this tends to suggest that it is uniquely well known. Somebody who met Marilyn Monroe, for instance, is typically thought to have attained a superior kind of knowledge to those who only know of her indirectly; in this way Monroe's casual acquaintances get one up on her biographers. This intuition seems to lurk in the background of the philosophical view that experience provides our only acquaintance with the intrinsic nature of reality; with knowledge of the objective world contrasted as a kind of extrinsic knowledge of how different elements of reality relate to each other.⁸ Experience is attributed this capacity to provide knowledge of the intrinsic because our direct knowledge of it is conceived as a kind of self-knowledge; the intrinsic nature of reality knows itself, as it were. Then on the basis of this self-knowledge, it is supposed that we form an extrinsic conception of the rest of the world. Thus we know a tree indirectly from the effects it has on our consciousness, and so learn what it is extrinsically – in terms of its relations to consciousness and objects which affect consciousness. But consciousness is known not from its effect on consciousness, but rather according to its own intrinsic nature; through direct self-knowledge.

This line of reasoning suggests that our knowledge of consciousness reveals the nature of reality as it is in itself. And since the nature revealed is experiential, accepting it would transform the transcendent hypothesis into a form of idealism. The reasoning is based on a mistake, however. The mistake is to misconstrue our understanding of experience as autonomous, when it is really just a *shadow of objective thought*. If we did have an autonomous set of concepts for understanding experience, there might be good reason to suppose that experiential concepts uniquely enable us to grasp the independent nature of reality. But we do not possess such concepts; when we interpret what we experience *as* experience, we do so equipped only with the concepts of objective thought. As such, in trying to form a positive conception of the nature of different types of experience, we necessarily misconceive experience. Once this point and its implications are grasped, traditional mind–body perplexities fade.

4. The transcendent hypothesis II: Introspection and perception

The notion that we have an autonomous understanding of experience goes hand in hand with the notion that we are aware of experience and the objective world via distinct faculties. Thus the distinction between introspection – through which we know conscious experience directly – and perception – through which we know the objective world indirectly – is traditionally thought of as between distinct cognitive faculties 'used to detect different regions of reality', as Colin McGinn puts it.⁹ This view

fits neatly with ontological dualism, in which the regions are held to be ontologically distinct; but it is also the standard view among physicalists, who think of the regions as simply different parts of the physical world – most typically the brain, in the case of introspective awareness, or whatever part of the physical world is being perceived, in the case of perceptual awareness. Once this interpretation is accepted, it subsequently makes sense that we should have an autonomous set of concepts for understanding conscious experience; these would be the concepts based on our awareness of experiences, as opposed to those based on the distinct kind of our awareness we have of other parts of reality.¹⁰

However there is an alternative to thinking of the distinction as between types of awareness sensitive to different parts of reality. For we can also think of it as between different components of an interpretation of a unitary reality – we interpret reality as experience we are introspectively aware of, and which makes us perceptually aware of the objective world. This interpretation requires us to misrepresent experience, because our experiential concepts are shadow concepts borrowed from the objective world. Thus once we adopt the ‘different components’ view, and realize that it incorporates misrepresentation, the reasoning which leads us to conclude that experience is the better known part of reality – and which subsequently points to the idealist conclusion that reality is intrinsically experiential – is immediately undermined. For then the pertinent question is no longer ‘which part of reality is better known?’ but rather ‘under which interpretation is reality known better?’ And the answer to this is clear: not as experience, but as perceptual awareness of an objective world.

For most of our waking lives we interpret what we are directly aware of as the objective world. Thus I ordinarily think of what is currently appearing to me as I look out of the window as a tree; not an experience caused within me by a tree, but a tree.¹¹ This everyday interpretation retreats of its own accord, however, when experience presents things with no obvious place in the objective world. Thus I am lying in bed looking up at the electric light, and find that by closing my eyes a little I can make the light extend from the bulb in a thick white line across the ceiling. Now I can no longer interpret what I am aware of as part of the objective world. The same thing occurs, if considerably more dramatically, when people hallucinate, and thereby experience all kinds of fantastical things.¹² In such cases, when I can no longer interpret what I experience as the objective world, I interpret it as experience: I think of the white line, or the hallucination, as something experiential. Experiential interpretations routinely co-exist with objective ones. Thus when I look at the ceiling, I am aware of both the ceiling and experience, namely the white line. Or I walk down the street attending to people, cars, an itch and my thoughts, taking myself to be simultaneously aware of both the objective world and experiences.

The fact that we sometimes have to interpret what we are aware of as experience provides a foothold for familiar philosophical reasoning. Thus, the reasoning goes, although it might naïvely seem that looking at the tree in broad daylight and looking at a hallucination have little in common, the fact remains that both are cases of experience, and so both must involve a self-aware experiential state. In this way, philosophical reasoning calls us to *always* interpret what we are aware of as an experiential array making us indirectly aware of the objective world. Helped along by science, I now

begin to think of the real tree as something like a cloud of molecules, not the familiar tree present within my consciousness – the one bathed in ‘phenomenal’ colour (note that I must now recognize a new kind of colour). And as such, I have learnt to distinguish perception from experience (or ‘sensation’), and may now understand myself as perceiving the tree by attending to the cause of my experience; something which experience provides a belief in and conception of.¹³

But all I have really done is to say to myself, in the face of a unitary reality: ‘I’m not thinking of this as the tree anymore, rather I’m thinking of it as my experience of the tree.’ The mistake occurs when we take this interpretation at face value, and so think that experience is one kind of thing for which we have one set of concepts, and the objective world is another for which we have a distinct set. This is a mistake because we are misinterpreting experience by conceiving it within the confines of objective thought. Since this is a misinterpretation, we cannot rely on it to tell us the nature of experience. Rather, we can rely on it only for what it tells us about the objective world; we are adopting an interpretation of transcendent being which requires us to misinterpret experience in order to articulate an objective world.

To see that we are misinterpreting experience, consider looking at the tree again. I suppose I can direct my attention to experience; an array of colour suitably arranged into the shape of a tree. But recall that experience has no place in the objective world – if experience has no place in the objective world, the colour cannot be arranged into the shape of a tree. For our only notion of spatial arrangement and shape belongs to the objective world. We have no other notion, and besides, this is evidently the notion we have in mind; the shape we discern in the experience is the shape the tree has, just as a photograph of a tree has the shape the tree has. This apparent match between the shape of the experience and the tree explains why Locke held that ideas of primary qualities resemble the qualities themselves. But as Berkeley pointed out, resemblance between ideas and physical objects ultimately makes no sense; and we might express this point by saying that if experience does not belong to the objective world, then an experience cannot resemble something objective in virtue of shape. We might try to get around this by talking of an abstract isomorphism rather than a resemblance, such that something about the nature of experience systematically correlates with the shape of the tree. But to say this is to admit that the notion of shape is inapplicable to experience, despite the fact that when I attend to my experience, all I find is something shaped like a tree; the experience of the leaves is *above* the experience of the trunk and so on. Since there are no tree-shaped experiences in the objective world, then, I must be misconceiving experience; in which case, I am in no position to assert an isomorphism between experience and the tree.

The situation is similar with the secondary qualities. Here we are tempted to distinguish the greenness of the experience of the leaves – the ‘qualé’ or ‘phenomenal’ greenness – from the greenness of the leaves – the property clouds of colourless molecules have of reflecting light at a certain frequency, let us say. The clouds of molecules then seem to possess nothing like the ‘phenomenal’ greenness; which is why Locke denied there was any resemblance in such cases. But just as we do not have two autonomous conceptions of shape, neither do we have two autonomous conceptions of colour – our only such conception comes from the objective world. Now this case

might seem different to the last, because unlike with shape, we are inclined to accord priority to our supposed 'phenomenal' conception of colour. Thus although we might readily accept that trees have shape but experiences do not, it is tempting to think that trees are clouds of colourless molecules and that real colour resides only in the mind. However if experiences do not have a size and shape, they can hardly have a colour which fills that size and shape. So once more our apparent grasp of what an experience is supposed to be slips away. For the greenness I had in mind filled the contours of my experiences; but since experiences can have no contours to be filled, this cannot be a property that experience possesses.

What is happening here is that when we switch interpretation from objective world to experience, we misconceive experience; we interpret experiences as if they were things in the objective world, when in actual fact – as we realize on further reflection – they have no place there. This misconception is inevitable because there is only one substantive interpretation of reality: the communal one we become adept at when we learn language, namely objective thought. Its historically embedded and hence practically irrevocable understanding places us in an objective world without experience. And yet we know that experience exists, exactly because we find ourselves 'placed' – we are always at the centre of a world we conceive as centreless.

When we form positive conceptions of experiences, then, we inevitably conceive them as putative occupants of the objective world. Thus we conceive visual experiences as special kinds of pictures, illuminations on an ever-present visual field; or bodily sensations as ethereal objects located in our bodies; or thinking as our own voice as if heard through headphones.¹⁴ However, we also interpret experiences as known only by the person whose experience it is. Consequently we conceive them as both objective and subjective; consider pains, for instance, which we conceive as located in our bodies, and hence as belonging to objective space, but also as subjective appearances. This combination is not manifestly incoherent, and so is easy to live with, because we can simply think of experiences as located in objective space but perceived by only one person. However philosophical reasoning quickly reveals that if experiences are directly known – as they must be to make us indirectly aware of the objective world – then they must be self-knowing; and the only explanation of this which does not violate our conception of experience is that they are subjective by nature.¹⁵ Since this subjectivity is incompatible with experiences existing in the space of the objective world – where anyone could in principle know them – the ordinary conception is ultimately incoherent. But its objective and subjective components both serve an invaluable role in our interpretation of reality. For the objective component allows us to think of experiences as having features causally determined by the objective world; while the subjective component allows us to explain why experiences cannot be found in the objective world.

That we need positive conceptions of experiences to build up our picture of the objective world is easily seen. For if I think of what I am aware of as just the tree, then if someone else describes it differently – as having darker coloured leaves, for instance – one of us must be wrong. The reason this kind of crass dilemma does not routinely occur is that the naïve interpretation of what we are directly aware of retreats of its own accord when challenged – as in the example of the white line extending from the light

bulb – and we naturally appeal to experience. So instead of thinking of what I am aware of as the tree, I think of it as an experience of the tree from a certain perspective; and this gives me new options to explain our disagreement. It might still be that one of us is wrong, but there might also be an experiential difference due to the different positions we are looking from; or even abnormalities in the other person's visual cortices. For now many factors pertaining to the perceived object and the perceiver it causally impacts upon can be appealed to, rather as in explaining why a camera captures a certain image we can appeal to a wide variety of factors in the environment or in the camera.

Of course, if experiences are not part of the objective world, then objective conditions cannot causally impact upon them in the way objective conditions do causally impact upon a camera image. It is rather the case that we interpret reality this way – as containing experiences with features causally determined by the environment and perceiver – in order to facilitate our interpretation of reality as an indirect awareness of an objective world. Thus we say that the leaves and brain activity caused the experience of green, for instance, because we conceive the experience as something objective, a kind of image. But we also conceive it as a subjective appearance to explain why only one person is aware of it and it is not to be found in the objective world. This conception of experience is ultimately incoherent, and as such must misrepresent experience. However by using it, and not dwelling on the incoherence, we become informed about the objective condition of the environment and perceiver.

Revisionism arises when we look for something to call 'experience' which really is caused by the objective conditions (dualism also arises in this way). Thus the leaves and brain activity cause the subject to report a green experience, and when we are inclined to report experiences and react in appropriate ways to them, we occupy a certain kind of functional state; the revisionist then looks to call these kinds of states 'experiences'. It would be better to call them 'experiential states', however, since they are only the objective counterparts of our concepts of different types of experiences. Experience itself is the transcendent reality we misinterpret as both part of the objective world and a subjective entity, in order to interpret it as indirect awareness of an objective world. Whereas the experiential state is the objective state we occupy when we make this misinterpretation and act accordingly, that is, when we act as if the objective world had caused a self-aware green image within us, for instance.

It is because we form positive, shadow conceptions of experiences – by conceiving them as in causal dialogue with the objective world – that experience exhibits apparent causal dependency upon the brain. Thus a person's waking experiences can be altered by altering their brain states; and if a dreamer's brain states are altered so that they wake, the dream experiences end. There is also a large body of scientific data showing that altering the brain states of dreamers can systematically alter their dreams.¹⁶ On the face of it, these apparent dependencies support both the dualist view that experience is causally dependent upon the brain, and the physicalist view that it is ontologically dependent upon the brain. But the transcendent hypothesis takes a different tact. It holds that the experience does not causally interact with the objective world, and neither is it a part of that world; since experience and the objective world are both parts of an interpretation of transcendent reality. It is the nature of the interpretation which explains the appearance of causal or ontological dependency; but it is not an accurate

interpretation because it requires us to conceive experience as objective. However it is by so conceiving experience that we arrive at our picture of an objective world in which objects like trees cause certain brain states, the function of which justifies us in classifying them as experiential states.¹⁷

Thus, I interpret reality as an experience of a tree from a certain perspective, and can then explain the experience's features as caused by features of the tree, or the perspective from which the tree was viewed. Now objective thought has discovered that the brain can be causally correlated with more of the features we find in experience than anything else in the objective world. Thus we conceive trees but not elephants as part of the causal explanation of tree experiences, but brains are conceived as part of the causal explanation of *any* experience, even those – such as hallucinations and dream experiences – where there is no external object. But this is no more puzzling, from the perspective of objective thought, than the fact that the internal workings of a camera are part of the causal explanation of any image it captures, and would also explain any autonomously produced image it was able to produce.

Experience is not dependent on the brain, however, because it is only by misconceiving experience that we are able to invoke this kind of causal explanation. Doing so allows us to interpret reality as experience of an objective world; and if we are to understand ourselves as having a perspective on that world, then the perspective must lead back to somewhere. That somewhere is the brain. However on the transcendent hypothesis, this apparent dependency is the result of a misconception of experience. Brain states do not have an independent existence which the existence of experience depends upon, causally or otherwise. Rather brain states are part of our interpretation of independent, transcendent reality. The reason experiences seem to be dependent upon them is that when we interpret reality as experiences caused by conditions in the objective world, at least part of that condition will always be a brain state. In hallucination and dreams it is the whole condition.

According to the hypothesis's conception of perception and introspection, then, instead of there being different types of awareness of different parts of reality, it is rather the case that we interpret reality as an introspectively known experiential field through which we are perceptually aware of an objective world; perception and introspection are two components of this interpretation. The interpretation requires us to form positive conceptions of experiences by applying concepts only applicable to the objective world. Thus we think of experiences as objective but somehow also self-knowing, with this self-knowledge facilitating perceptual awareness of the objective conditions that caused them. Since we consequently take ourselves to be only indirectly aware of objective features such as green, we reason that experience itself cannot be green. We thereby invent a different kind of colour, 'phenomenal-green', and seem to have an autonomous concept applicable to a different part of reality. But the new concept is just a shadow of the first; because although we would not conceptualize the experiential property as a spectral surface reflectance, for instance, we do nevertheless conceptualize it as extended in space. The new concept is actually just our original concept of an objective feature – from before we scientifically refined it – but now displaced onto experience.¹⁸ In attributing the feature to experience, we thereby think of it as something subjective and distinct from the objective world. But since we are

applying a shadow concept of an objective feature, we also think of it as objective – which allows us to think of it as in causal contact with the objective world and thus informative. Consequently we have misconceived experience. But we have done so to make maximal sense of reality.

This account reveals the confusion behind debates over the ‘transparency’ of experience. One side says that all experience makes us aware of is the perceived object, and that we cannot redirect our attention to the experience itself. The other side says we can redirect our attention at will between the perceived object and experience.¹⁹ However whether we take ourselves to be aware of experience or the perceived object is simply a matter of which component of our interpretation of reality we attend to. We can switch between thinking of ourselves as directly aware of the experience or indirectly aware of the object – and this explains the intuition behind the second view. But there is only one thing there – which explains the intuition behind the first.

5. The transcendent hypothesis III: Appearance and reality

The view that we have autonomous concepts of subjective entities or properties is encouraged by an asymmetry between concepts like phenomenal-green, for which we call the corresponding objective property ‘green’; and concepts like pain, for which there is no corresponding property to call ‘pain’. Since in the latter case there is no objective property, it seems the concept must be autonomous. And if some experiential concepts are autonomous, this raises the possibility that they all are; perhaps our concept of phenomenal-green, for instance, is also an independent concept of an experience, rather than a shadow concept formed on the basis of our encounters with certain light-reflecting surfaces. This is a misunderstanding of the asymmetry, however.

It is a misunderstanding because the reason there is no objective feature we call ‘pain’ is not because the concept of pain is an autonomous concept of a subjective feeling, but rather because of the causal chain by which we take pain to be caused; the asymmetry is all at the level of objective thought. In the case of colour, we think of an objective feature as the cause of our colour experience, and thereby misconceive the experience as something the feature caused; we think of it as a self-aware visual image and form a shadow concept for the supposed colour of the experience. In the case of pain, we also think of an objective feature as the cause of the experience, and thereby misconceive the experience as something the feature caused; we think of it as a self-aware disturbance within the body and form a shadow concept for the supposed pain-quality of the experience. The difference is that in the colour case, but not the pain case, the objective feature is conceived as capable of causing the experience intersubjectively. Thus the colour experience is conceived as the causal upshot of light reflecting into the eyes; and the surface property responsible could have this effect on any suitably positioned person. In the case of pain, however, the objective feature – be it bodily damage or perhaps just a brain state – is conceived as only causing the experience in *one particular subject*, such that the feature only has this effect in the person whose bodily damage or brain state it is. Objective thought has a simple explanation of this asymmetry, namely that people are wired up to detect the objective causes of their

own pain experiences but not those of others, whereas every normal visual perceiver is wired up to detect the objective causes of colour experiences.

It is because objective thought conceives the causation in which objective features give rise to pain experiences as specific to individual people, that it has no use for an objective feature called 'pain'. For objective features need to be there for everyone, so we can talk about them and agree on how to describe them. If we imagine a science-fiction scenario in which our brains were wired up differently, so that internal bodily features were capable of an intersubjective effect, then no doubt we would call those bodily features 'pain' and the asymmetry would disappear. We might then call a property such as C-fibre stimulation in the brain 'pain' and conceive it as the cause of 'phenomenal-pain'. As things stand, however, we have the shadow concept without the original. But this provides no reason to think of it as an autonomous concept, because the process by which the concept is formed is just the same. Thus we form the concept of pain by ascribing a feature to something in the objective world – the part of the body where the pain is felt. Then in order to interpret reality as experience which makes us indirectly aware of that feature, we reconceive the feature – or another which objective thought decides is more causally relevant – as the cause of the experience of pain, thereby forming the shadow concept of 'phenomenal-pain'. The only difference is that we do not then call the objective feature 'pain', because it is not conceived as causing the experience intersubjectively.

This shows why the traditional idea that there is no appearance/reality distinction for experiences is so apt to mislead. The idea is that we can make the distinction for something objective like gold – such that 'fool's gold' might appear to be gold though it is not really – whereas we cannot make it for an experience like pain. What is right about this is that we conceive pain, but not gold, as an experiential property; we conceive it as a kind of subjective appearance. However we also conceive it as existing in space, and hence as an occupant of the objective world; we conceive it as a subjective appearance located in part of the body.²⁰ As such, our conception of pain is ultimately incoherent; which is why it is a mistake to conclude from it that the essence of experiential properties is their subjective appearance – and that since there is nothing to be known about them except how they appear, they are better known than objective properties. For although there is indeed no room for an appearance/reality distinction for pain within the unstable subjective component of our ordinary conception, there is at the level of metaphysics. For pain appears to be a subjective appearance located within our bodies, but we know it is not, since the objective world can contain no such thing. It is a misrepresentation of transcendent reality.

Since our positive conceptions of experiences are misconceptions, it is also easy to be misled by the thought that in having experiences we learn something new, namely *what it is like* to have them. There is something important to this thought, since there is no experience in the objective world, and so in having an experience we will indeed learn something objective thought cannot tell us about. However, although the having of an experience demonstrates the incompleteness of objective thought, it is a mistake to infer that objective thought needs to improve to make up for the shortfall; or that knowledge of 'what it is like' is knowledge of a different part of reality than the objective world.²¹ These are mistakes because in having an experience, and making

sense of it in the only way we can – namely with objective thought – we are forming a misconception. As such, objective thought's conception of reality can hardly be held to account for failing to incorporate this misconception. For what we are learning is how to misconceive reality as experience in order to make sense of it as indirect awareness of the objective world; we are not learning about a part of the objective world we do not currently understand, or about a non-objective reality which supplements the objective one within the same context.²²

Thus suppose I could somehow acquire the experiences of a bat.²³ To make sense of this, I will interpret reality as direct awareness of bat experiences, and indirect awareness of the objective world from a perspective I have never occupied before. In this way I will learn what it is like to be a bat by forming concepts of bat experiences. I will subsequently be able to recognize, compare and contrast them, and if I retained my human experiential concepts I might find this informative; I might learn that echolocation is more like human vision than touch, for instance. However whether I think of my experiences as visual images, or disturbances within my body, or something else entirely, I will still think of them as occupants of the objective world and hence misconceive them. As such, I will not have learnt anything objective thought ought to have been able to tell me.

Objective thought might even be able to predict these misconceptions without the need for me to have bat experiences; since to have the experiences I would have to be in certain physical states, and if these were known it might be possible to work out how they would affect the speech centres of my brain. The intuition remains, however, that in having the experiences I learn something ineffable, which my misconceptions are just vain attempts to capture in words. There is also something to this, since a component of experiential concepts is demonstrative. Thus only when I have had bat experiences will I be able to recognize them as 'that' kind of experience. This explains the ineffability intuition, since we can recognize things demonstratively without being able to convey them in words; I recognize what my garden looks like from here, for instance, but if I described it over the phone to an artist it seems unlikely they could produce even a moderately accurate picture. However, although bats having an experiential 'that' to conceptualize is something of which objective thought is oblivious, nevertheless having bat experiences – and thereby acquiring misconceptions with a demonstrative component – is not going to tell us anything about what they are.

Similarly, it is said that someone acquainted with objective thought's final story about the nature of red, would upon seeing red for the first time learn what it is like to see red – which is not something they could have known before.²⁴ Now again, it seems that if this person knew enough about the objective world, they might know exactly what they would say upon first seeing red; that they would say, for instance, 'wow I've learnt something new, since this is quite unlike my old black-and-white experiences'. However the intuition remains that on having the experience they learn something ineffable. Again this seems right, and best accounted for in terms of their acquisition of demonstrative concepts. Thus when they first see red, they acquire a new demonstrative concept of it as 'that' property, the one they are indirectly aware of when they have a certain type of experience; as well as a shadow concept of 'that' as an experience of red. However although this will allow them to recognize red when they

see it, and the experience of red when they have it, it will not teach them anything new about reality under either interpretation. For learning to recognize red as 'that' kind of colour provides no information about what the objective property is. And since the shadow concept will be a misrepresentation, they will not learn anything about experience either; they already knew that it existed, after all.

6. The transcendent hypothesis IV: Idealism and realism

In order to make sense of transcendent being, we interpret it as experience which makes us indirectly aware of an objective world. However, if experiences existed as we conceive them, they would have to exist in the objective world, since we conceive them spatially; as at the very least spatially coextensive with our bodies rather flying through the air, for instance. But objective thought knows of no such things, and neither could it, since they are also conceived as self-knowing and hence subjective by nature. As such we must be misconceiving experience. Thus our conception of transcendent reality as experience is revealed as an invisible crutch; it allows us to articulate an objective world, but when we follow through on it, experience is no longer there. Nevertheless there evidently is something we are interpreting, and we have no alternative to thinking of it as experience of an objective world. But all we can correctly say about experience itself is that it is transcendent.

From this, we see that experience is not better known than the objective world, as the idealist tradition has maintained, but on the contrary is known only as something transcendent which we misconceive in order to make sense of it as awareness of an objective world. As such, our awareness of experience will not allow us to know transcendent reality as it is in itself. Objective thought cannot reveal the independent nature of reality because it misses out consciousness and describes a world that is transcended. And our awareness of experience cannot either, since our only legitimate conception of experience is that it is transcendent.

It might still seem that there are positive characteristics of experience we know, such as that it appears and is self-aware, for instance; and that these characteristics might carry over to transcendent reality. But this is an illusion, since experience cannot appear without appearing in some place or another; and the notion of appearance is in any case just an analogical borrowing from objective thought. Thus the sun appears from behind a cloud, and we think of experience as appearing when we wake from a dreamless sleep; it 'stands before us' somehow. But this analogy contains no great insight into the nature of experience. It is just that we know experience exists – and we know that something exists in the objective world when it appears before us. Likewise, the notion that experience is 'self-aware' is just an attempt to conceive what experience would have to be like if it were objective. So we have an objective conception of awareness, and we reason that if an experience were a thing in the world, it would not only have to be aware of things in the world, but also aware of its own awareness. However experience does not belong to the objective world; the notion of experiential self-awareness is simply part of our misconception of experience, and so the transcendent hypothesis is free of this narcissistic vision.

Thus our awareness of experience does not reveal the independent nature of reality as it is in itself. This we can never rationally expect to know, since as conscious beings we can only know reality as it appears within consciousness; and consciousness is always transcendent. We can know transcendent reality as it appears within consciousness by interpreting it as experience of an objective world. But the final context of independent reality cannot be one in which we are conscious, since in that context there is nothing transcendent to facilitate consciousness. Compare trying to find out about this context to trying to find out about the objective world from within a dream – this would be impossible unless we could at some point wake up. The independent nature of a transcendent reality we cannot wake to, then, is not something we can rationally expect to discover.²⁵

Is the transcendent hypothesis a form of realism or idealism? Realism holds that the objective world would exist as we conceive it even if there were no consciousness. Idealism typically holds that the independent nature of reality is captured by our conception of consciousness, and that the objective world is a construction from consciousness. The transcendent hypothesis has something in common with both; but since it holds that consciousness is transcendent, cannot ultimately be classified as either.

On the face of it, it has most in common with idealism, since it holds that our conception of the objective world is not a conception of independent being. Also like idealism, it is committed to the independent existence of experience, since it holds that we interpret reality as experience of an objective world in order to make sense of it; and that although the objective world is transcended, experience has transcendent being. However unlike idealism, the hypothesis denies that we have any legitimate conception of experience except that it is transcendent. The idealist, by contrast, thinks we have a positive conception of the intrinsically experiential nature of reality. Another difference is that the transcendent hypothesis does not claim that experience is all that exists, for it is compatible with the existence of transcendent being we do not interpret as experience of an objective world, since we do not interpret it at all.²⁶ As such, although there is a sense in which the hypothesis prioritizes experience over the objective world, it is not a form of idealism since it does not hold that all reality is experiential; it says rather that all reality is transcendent.

Nevertheless, it might still seem to inherit the worst aspect of idealism by reducing the objective world to the status of a dream, given that the objective world becomes a posit to make sense of waking experience; as the dream world is a posit to make sense of dream experience. But this is a misunderstanding. A dream world is transcended when we wake, and within the wider understanding then at our disposal, we no longer have a use for the dream world; but we still need to talk about dream experiences, misconceived as part of the objective world. As such, we regard the dream world as unreal because the dream experiences remain integral to our understanding of reality but the dream world does not. The objective world, however, will never be transcended within our experience and our commitment to it is practically irreplaceable. Consequently we have no reason to describe it as unreal; we are not going to wake from it, and it does not disappear when we turn our backs. It does not have independent existence, to be sure, but transcendent reality does, and the best sense we can make of that reality is as experience of an objective world – a world which can be treated as independently existing

for all purposes except metaphysics. Dreams and hallucinations cannot be so treated, which is why we call them 'unreal'. The reason our conception of the objective world provides our ordinary and scientific criterion of reality, though not our metaphysical one, is that it is by far the richest and most powerful interpretation of independent reality we have; our conception of experience, by contrast, tells us nothing except that it is transcendent. As such, although the hypothesis prioritizes experience over the objective world, in the sense that it is only committed to the independent existence of the former, it prioritizes our conception of the objective world over our conception of experience as an interpretation of reality. In this sense, then, the hypothesis has a closer affinity with realism than idealism.

But is this just transcendental idealism? After all, Kant also denied his theory was a 'genuine' idealism, and was at pains to affirm what he called 'empirical' realism.²⁷ Well, there is certainly one obvious point of contact: both hold that independent reality is transcendent and unknowable as it is in itself. However, for Kant this claim is just the beginning of an elaborate attempt to delve into the structuring capacities of the human mind, in order to show how the manifold of passively received intuition is synthesized through various layers of a priori mental operations into a world we can experience and know. The transcendent hypothesis endorses none of this. This is not because it is a stripped-down Kantianism, but rather for a principled reason which explains why – unlike Kant's theory – it cannot be classified as idealism in any sense.

The reason is that in the sense we make of transcendent reality, Kant prioritizes the mind, whereas the transcendent hypothesis prioritizes the objective world. Kant does not think transcendent reality is intrinsically mental, to be sure, since he thinks its independent nature is unknowable; but he does nevertheless think that the objective world is a mental representation or appearance of transcendent reality. Thus he says:

there are bodies outside us, that is, things which, though completely unknown to us as they may be in themselves, we know through the representations which their influence on our sensibility provides for us, and to which we give the name of a body – which word therefore merely signifies the appearance of this object that is unknown to us but is nevertheless real.²⁸

According to the transcendent hypothesis, however, the objective world is not a mental representation of transcendent reality, but rather part of an interpretation of transcendent reality; something we commit ourselves to the existence of in order to make sense of it. And interpretation and representation need not be construed as mental.²⁹ Moreover, although we use both mental and physical concepts to make sense of transcendent being, our positive conception of mind is parasitic upon objective thought – which is what justifies the claim that the transcendent hypothesis prioritizes the objective. This parasitism renders our positive conception of mind a misrepresentation, for it misrepresents it as objective, leaving our only metaphysically legitimate conception of mind as something transcendent, which is practically devoid of content. But for Kant, by contrast, the best sense we can make of transcendent reality is in terms of mental representations and our mental operations upon them. This prompts his various a priori investigations into the supposed depths of mind and justifies the label 'idealism'

for the result. It is because of the epistemological priority Kant accorded to mind that he thought he could discover things a priori about the objective world, such as the nature of objective space and time – and thereby strayed disastrously into scientific territory. But philosophy can only make discoveries about the status of the objective world within the context of transcendence; that is, philosophical discoveries.

7. Is it true?

That was the long story and this is the short. We ordinarily think of ourselves as sometimes aware of the objective world and sometimes aware of experience; but philosophical reflection teaches us that a more coherent and sustainable interpretation of reality is that we are always (when conscious) directly aware of experience, with that experience sometimes making us indirectly aware of the objective world. This interpretation requires us to misconceive experience as part of the objective world, because we have no alternative if we are to form positive conceptions of individual experiences; and we need to do this to facilitate causal explanations involving the impact of the world upon experience and vice versa. By means of these explanations we are provided with a conception of the objective world in which experience has no place; this is the source of the mind/body problem. This problem is solved, however, when we realize that the conception of experience we used to derive our conception of an experienceless objective world is, from the perspective of metaphysics, just a necessary evil; and that all we can accurately say of experience is that it is transcendent.

If this account is correct it would explain the persistence of the problem of consciousness. Since ancient times, people have been fascinated by the possibility of transcendence because it holds out the prospect of life being placed within a radically new context. In such a context, nihilism, injustice and death might all be negated. In terms of human interest, then, the reason for the fascination is obvious. However, according to the transcendent hypothesis there is another reason beyond wishful thinking. This is that transcendence is a fact which reason can discover. One way we can discover it is through reflection upon conscious experience. It is hardly surprising, then, that history has found a never-ending supply of philosophers ready to argue, in a variety of ways, that the reason consciousness seems to be something beyond the objective world is that it actually is. For not only were they right, they were asserting something people have always regarded as of the greatest significance; something people have pinned their hopes on and which seems capable of turning our conception of life upside down.

However it is exactly because of this connection of transcendence with religious and mystical hypotheses of meaningful enframement, that history has also found a never-ending supply of philosophers ready to argue the reverse. For if we hold that religious hypotheses are false and that objective thought provides our best conception of reality, then it is natural to want to deny transcendence; the idea of transcendence seems like nothing but baggage from false religious hypotheses rooted in wishful thinking. Moreover philosophical claims to a reality beyond the objective world seem to denigrate scientific understanding – as traditional metaphysics was wont to do – to

the detriment of the apparently more modest and believable contemporary image of philosophy as a discipline that works in tandem with science. For these reasons, then, philosophers have been persuaded that a place must be found for experience in the objective world. Efforts to find this place, however, have all ended in revisionism.

The debate has persisted because philosophers of the first kind realize that experience exists and cannot be replaced by a revisionist substitute, whereas philosophers of the second kind think that a pro-scientific conception of philosophy requires experience to be something objective. In effect, the philosophical convictions of the first require them to reject all the efforts of the second, while the metaphilosophical convictions of the second require them to keep trying. The transcendent hypothesis promises to resolve this impasse. Philosophically it sides with the first, but metaphilosophically it should be acceptable to the second; since its claim that consciousness is transcendent is completely lacking in consequences for nihilism, while a matter of indifference for science. It is lacking in consequences for nihilism because its existence has no consequence for questions of enframement. At some point in the past reality created a picture of itself and that picture is consciousness. We cannot climb out of it, but we have no reason to want to; since we have no reason to think the reality outside is any less meaningless than the reality within.³⁰ And the claim that reality is transcendent is a matter of indifference for science, because its only implication for objective thought is that it does not describe independent reality as it is in itself; which is a matter of only philosophical interest.

According to the transcendent hypothesis, then, there is a basis in reality for religious and mystical beliefs, and so the persistence and prevalence of such beliefs cannot all be put down to wishful thinking and scientific ignorance. That reflection on consciousness leads to transcendence, on which religious hypotheses pin their hopes, explains its philosophical interest. Thus idealist philosophers have tried to use consciousness as a rational route to religious hypotheses, while realist philosophers have tried to close off any prospect of a reality beyond the objective world in order to philosophically consolidate the scientific world-view. In pursuit of the latter agenda, philosophers have persistently tried to conceive consciousness as part of the objective world, but their attempts always fail because consciousness is transcendent. Once this is realized, there is no longer any pressure to believe that the brain is an inexplicably special part of the world, or that experiences are bizarre subjective objects in inexplicable communion with our bodies. The unique ability of the transcendent hypothesis to avoid these typical but evidently unsatisfactory results, while digging deep into the roots of philosophical interest to explain the persistence of the mind/body problem, provides good reason to think it is true.