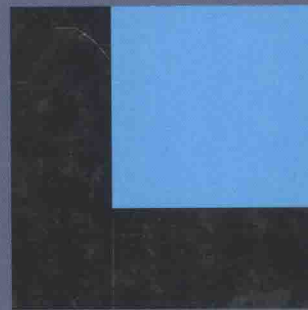
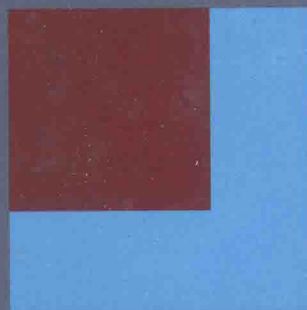
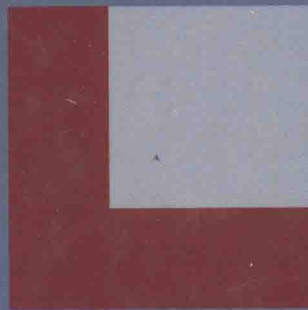


Phenomenology and the Physical Reality of Consciousness

Arthur Melnick

Advances in Consciousness Research

83



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Phenomenology and the Physical Reality of Consciousness

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Volume 83

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by Arthur Melnick

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Introduction

The predominant positive view among philosophers and scientists is that consciousness is something realized in brain activity. The challenge to this view by opposing philosophers is that it largely fails to capture what consciousness is like according to how it shows itself to conscious beings. I believe this challenge has not been met by brain theorists. What I propose instead is that consciousness is an activity or phenomenon that exists in and throughout the body. Just as circulation is a whole body phenomenon with the heart as the sustaining and generating organ, so too consciousness is a whole body phenomenon with the brain as the sustaining and generating organ. To say consciousness takes place in the brain is just as mistaken as to say that circulation takes place specifically within the heart. Indeed it is even more mistaken, since although some circulation does take place in the heart, my contention is that no consciousness takes place in the brain.

The fact that we are consciously sentient of throbbing, stresses, and strains in our body already precludes the brain as the locus of consciousness. The brain at most encodes these bodily phenomena in a neuronal form. But consciousness immediately reverberates with, or is in the throes of, such phenomena. They are not represented in some cognitive code, but felt as they are in their bodily character. The brain can no more undergo, or be in the throes of, throbbing or straining than a computer running a program of a thunderstorm can get wet.

The bodily character of consciousness is emphasized by Merleau-Ponty and Sam Todes following him. However neither they, nor their defenders in the “naturalizing phenomenology” movement, have successfully made the move from consciousness having a bodily character to its being a specific bodily phenomenon that has that character. To hold that consciousness is an organismic phenomenon, or a phenomenon coupling the organism with its environment, is to say what larger process consciousness subserves, not what bodily phenomenon it is. It is like holding that circulation is a phenomenon coupling the organism to its environment in regard to oxygen/carbon-dioxide exchange. This is true, but leaves out what phenomenon circulation is. Osmosis is such an exchange system, but is not circulation at all. Similarly, the supposed coupling of the organism to its environment by consciousness, in regard to being in versatile sync with how the world is, seems to be something that can be effected non-consciously. Systems theories and

the naturalizing phenomenology movement, by merely shifting the locus outside the brain, no more capture the interiority of consciousness than brain theories.

The definitive fact about consciousness *per se* is that it is self-intimating or self-disclosive. Consciousness is something that is open to itself, or that is something to itself within its very being. The basic idea of this work is that bodily waves of muscle vibrations form a field throughout the body within which each vibration both discloses and is disclosed by all other vibrations. Everything within this field then is intimated within this field, and so it is a field of complete self-intimation or self-disclosure. These waves can take on, or be deformed according to, motions in the bodily wave medium. Thus throbbing motion at a location is taken up by the waves as they pass through, thereby modifying the entire field. In this way consciousness within itself can immediately take on, or reverberate with, specific bodily qualities.

The challenge by philosophers to brain theorists, that they fail to capture consciousness according to how it shows up for conscious beings, is usually taken to apply to any physical account whatsoever. If it doesn't show up as neuronal brain activity then, according to this challenge, it doesn't show up either as waves of muscle vibrations progressing back and forth throughout the body. I contend, however, that these waves and the deformations they take on have the character of masking their own development. Hence, they show up as a ready-made, apparently un-constituted and non-physical, field of self-intimation. The situation is somewhat similar to groups of traveling waves that, in forming standing waves, mask their own travel. That consciousness is a physical process that masks its own physical constitution accounts for the apparent discrepancy between consciousness, as it shows up to the conscious being, and physical phenomena. The solution pertains as well to specific qualities or modifications of consciousness, as with experiences of color quality. Color qualities are eye motions that when taken on by waves of self-disclosure get masked into the uniform simple appearance evident within consciousness. The so-called "hard problem" of consciousness is solved by identifying it with a physical phenomenon that physically masks its own physical nature as something constituted by ordinary physical motions.

Even if this view can be maintained for sheer conscious sentience, or for sheer sensory consciousness, it seems not to apply to intentional consciousness in general, and thinking consciousness in particular. Surely it is the brain that represents or thinks. I claim rather that intentions in general, and thoughts in particular, are incipient bodily primings for action. As such they can be taken on by bodily waves of self-disclosure and so be conscious. What goes on in the brain is not conscious thinking or representing unless and until it "leaks" into the body as motor-priming. Rather than intentionality or directedness being definitive of consciousness, it is something that takes place within consciousness,

or within bodily self-disclosive sentience. Since intentions and thoughts in particular qualify or modify waves of self-disclosure they, like anything else present in consciousness, have phenomenal quality.

Even the subject that has intentions exists as a bodily action of settling on particular intentions. Intentions in general, and thoughts in particular, emerge from this settling or ruminating action. The presence of the subject or the self is thus a bodily presence disclosed by qualifying bodily consciousness. If so, then the conscious thinking subject, or the thinking self, is encompassed within sentient self-intimation. In this manner the last traces of the non-bodily Cartesian view, whether in a physical guise or not, are removed.

The attempt to work out a unified physical account of consciousness to include bodily sensation, perception, thinking, and consciousness of the self leads to fresh insights regarding a host of philosophical issues. That conscious states span a specious present constituted by predominant attention is one consequence. A second is a clear separation between sensory disclosure and any sort of representationalism. As far as perception is concerned, the bodily nature of conscious percepts, especially momentum percepts, leads to a percept view that lifts the veil of perception, allowing reality to be revealed in the conscious perceptual activity of the organism. The nature of intentions as bodily primings leads to a principled distinction between narrow and wide content, as well as to a harmonizing of the psychological role of intentions and thoughts with their semantic character. There are further fresh implications for issues such as personal identity and the grasp of other selves.

Throughout this work I have tried to take phenomenology or the first person point of view at face value. It turns out ironically that the more one keeps to the apparently non-physical phenomenology, the clearer the physical nature of consciousness becomes. The evisceration of the phenomenology by many philosophers, supposedly in order to clear the way for a physical account, is exactly what obscures the physical nature of consciousness.

There is more construction of physical models in this work than is usual in philosophy. The reason is that I have found it more enlightening to first present such models, and only then in terms of them to engage the arguments and positions set forth in the literature. Arguments against physicalism, such as Kripke's and Jackson's, and competing physicalist positions, such as representationalism and functionalism, can be diagnosed with greater clarity and precision once a model of a physical reduction is set up.

The models of consciousness, conscious qualia, intentions, and the self that I present are all contrived. I have no empirical evidence that any of them actually obtain. They can be regarded simply as "consistency proofs" of the idea that consciousness, according to its phenomenology, is a physical reality. However, I

do not believe that the reality of these models has been empirically falsified. The impressive body of correlations between brain activity and consciousness has not controlled for the possibility that the correlation is due to the role of the brain in generating a self-disclosive field of bodily waves of muscle vibration. Without some clear model of consciousness in accord with its phenomenology empirical science is left with correlations between brain processes and first-person reports and behavior that are symptoms of consciousness, and not always clear or reliable ones at that. The usual models of consciousness along functionalist lines fail to be models that accord with what consciousness is for the being that undergoes it. Without a physical model that captures the phenomenology, it is just not clear that an empirical science of consciousness is possible at all.

Descartes ridicules the view of the soul as some sort of ethereal matter running through the body. My contention is that just such a view is the only one that makes sense of the physical reality of consciousness as it seems to us in being conscious. The “ethereal” self-intimating field of waves of muscle vibration is the conscious soul. Consciousness is not the “ghost” in the computing brain machine. Rather the brain is the machine in the bodily “ghost”.

PART I

Consciousness per se

CHAPTER 1

The material nature of consciousness

1. Preliminary statement of the claim

The view I will be defending is that consciousness is an action that takes place in the body. Although the brain is the engine that keeps consciousness running, no consciousness takes place in the brain. Somewhat analogously circulation of the blood takes place in and throughout the body. The heart is the engine of circulation but circulation is not a phenomenon that takes place exclusively in the heart. The dis-analogy is that although some circulation does take place in the heart, on my view no consciousness whatsoever takes place in the brain. The fact that the brain itself doesn't feel pain is true I claim not just in the case of poking or tapping the brain, but in the case of electrically stimulating it as well.

The view I am opposing, that consciousness is a phenomenon of the brain may fairly be said to be the orthodox view. It is held by philosophers otherwise as widely divergent as Searle and Dennett. Searle says:

In a word the conscious mind is caused by brain processes and is itself a higher level feature of the brain. (Searle 2000: 566)

and Dennett says:

The proposed consensual thesis is not that this global availability [of information throughout the workspace in the brain] causes some further effect of a different sort altogether, but rather that it is, all by itself, a conscious state.

(Dennett 2005: 134)

It is perhaps the orthodox view in neuroscience as well as expressed by Christof Koch:

If there is one thing that scientists are reasonably sure of, it is that brain activity is both necessary and sufficient for biological sentience. (Koch 2007: 9)

Although the view that consciousness takes place in the brain is the orthodox one, it is not the universal one among philosophers. Thus Brewer says, elaborating on Gareth Evans:

the animal body is the conscious mental subject of bodily awareness.

(Brewer 1995: 300)

and somewhat less definitely Sam Todes claims:

the human body is the material subject of the world.

(Todes 2001: 88)

Merleau-Ponty would seem to be the contemporary source of the view I wish to defend, but his statements, at least in *Phenomenology of Perception*, are somewhat ambiguous. Although he does say:

I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather *I am it*.

(italics mine) (Merleau-Ponty 1989: 173)

and that the body is “sensitive”, he also says:

Primary perception is a non-thetic, pre-objective and *pre-conscious* experience.

(Merleau-Ponty 1989: 275)

Of course Merleau-Ponty holds that the phenomenology of perceptual and sensory consciousness is bodily through and through. My claim is that it is not just the phenomenology, but the ontology of consciousness that is bodily. I am not only claiming that there is such a thing as the “lived” body discerned “from the inside”, but that the discerning or consciousness of this body is itself a bodily phenomenon. My contention is not just that there is a subjective bodily organization or character to consciousness, but that the subjective consciousness that has or discerns that organization is itself a bodily phenomenon. So, for example, my contention is not just that pain is felt to be in the body, but that the very feeling or consciousness of pain is a bodily phenomenon outside the brain.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, at least, Merleau-Ponty seems not to be concerned with the ontological issue of what consciousness is, but Brewer, for example, does argue from the bodily character of the phenomenology to the body being the mental subject of awareness. Brewer, however, restricts his conclusion to bodily awareness, whereas I wish to claim that all consciousness whatsoever, whether sensory, perceptual, or conceptual is a bodily phenomenon. Although I shall motivate the view by beginning with consciousness as sheer sentient awareness, in Parts III and IV I shall claim that the view set out in Part I constitutes the generic nature of consciousness. The idea that sensation, as opposed to thought say, is bodily or involves the body goes back of course to Descartes and Aristotle before him. Whether either of them can be said to hold that consciousness as sheer sentient awareness is bodily is not clear, first because it isn't clear that Descartes held that sensation without thought is conscious at all, and second because it isn't clear that Aristotle had a notion of consciousness as sheer awareness. What is somewhat

clearer however is that both Descartes and Aristotle held that conscious thought is not a bodily phenomenon. When I contend that consciousness is a bodily phenomenon, then, I am claiming that this is so ontologically, and that this is so for all consciousness whatsoever, not just for consciousness of the lived body and for sensory consciousness.

Although Brewer and Todes claim the human or animal body is the conscious subject of bodily sensations (Brewer) or the perceived world (Todes), they don't say what it is about the body by which it can be such a conscious subject. The second part of my contention is that consciousness is a bodily-distributed activity or action. By 'action' I mean exactly an organization of energy or momentum distribution over space and time. I don't mean for example some act that the subject or the body performs or does intentionally. An example of an action I shall frequently refer to is harmonic oscillation. Such an action is a periodic distribution of potential and kinetic energy over a spatial route during a temporal interval. The oscillation exists in, or is, this spatio-temporal organization of energy distribution. As another example, temperature regulation is a thermostatic action of the body. The organization or structure of energy distribution in this case is, roughly, the reduction or increase of overall kinetic energy of the body in relation to an equilibrium point. Note first that this notion of action characterizes what goes on dynamically at a global level throughout the body. In particular it doesn't characterize how various components of the body (and brain) achieve this overall thermostatic action. My characterization of the bodily action that consciousness is will likewise be at this global level. My contention will be that consciousness is an overall dynamical organization of energy distribution throughout the body as a whole over time intervals. This dynamical action is surely in part effected or achieved and sustained by the brain, but it is not itself a distribution of energy that takes place in the brain.

For all that Todes and Merleau-Ponty tell us about the bodily character of the phenomenology of awareness and perception nothing they say seems to imply that the locus of the consciousness that has this phenomenology is not the brain itself having representations with holistic bodily content. It is sometimes held that Merleau-Ponty replaces the mind-body problem with the body-body problem, or with the problem of how the lived body (subjectively discerned sensation, proprioception, acting, etc.) relates to the objective body (the body discerned as a material object in objective space). I shall deal with this issue in Part III recast as the problem of how sensing the body relates to perceiving one's body objectively. For now, my point is that this does not erase or supplant the mind-body problem, which applies equally to the lived and the objective body. What reality or action is the very consciousness of the lived body *or* the very consciousness of the objective body? What phenomenon is being-conscious per se, whether that consciousness