

The Metaphysics of Consciousness

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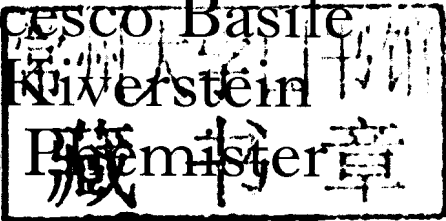
Edited by Pierfrancesco Basile, Julian Kiverstein & Pauline Phemister

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Preface

In a recent article entitled 'The Mind-Body Problem at Century's Turn',¹ one of the leading thinkers in contemporary philosophy of mind, Jaegwon Kim, observes that '[t]hrough much of the twentieth century, especially during the second half, debates over the mind-body problem were shaped by physicalism', that is, the metaphysical belief that 'all things that exist in this world are bits of matter and structures aggregated out of bits of matter'. Once this metaphysical framework is accepted, Kim goes on to say, then 'the foremost metaphysical problem about the mind is where in the physical world our minds fit – in fact, whether minds have a place in such an austere physical world at all' (129).

Kim has his own view as to how minds can be accommodated within a physical universe. His suggestion is that the most salient features of consciousness – cognitive intentional states like belief, desire, or memory – can be coherently integrated within a physicalist worldview by means of functional reductions, that is, by re-conceptualising them in terms of the causal work they are supposed to do. To illustrate: part of the causal work of my belief that fire burns is to keep my body at a reasonable distance from it; thus, a capability to perform this function would be an essential part of any definition of what it is to believe that fire burns. Kim has little doubt that such reductions are possible in principle, even though they may be very difficult to achieve in fact. He also frankly admits, however, that there are aspects of consciousness – specifically, its qualitative, *phenomenal* aspects – that cannot be functionally re-conceptualised and are therefore physically irreducible: 'Qualia...' – he remarks – 'are the "mental residue" that cannot be accommodated within the physical domain' (143). According to Kim, the existence of this mental residue is not a serious threat to physicalism; as he has it, '[p]hysicalism is not the whole truth, but is the *truth near enough*, and *near enough* should be *good enough*' (146).

This is a striking statement. Drawing on his deep knowledge of the philosophical debate over the mind-body problem in the last decades, Kim constructs a powerful argument in support of reductive physicalism. But a theory of consciousness that fails to account for those

¹ *The Future for Philosophy*, edited by Brian Leiter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 129–52.

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aspects of it that we most cherish and care about (surely, it is the *painfulness* of pain that we seek to avoid!) has failed to grasp something essential to its object of investigation. One does not need to be an old fashioned Hegelian or a Bradleyan idealist to recognise that ‘*Das Wahre ist das Ganze*’ or that ‘no partial truth is really quite true’: unless *all* aspects of a given phenomenon (consciousness or anything else) are accounted for, we can’t be sure that we have explained it correctly. Hence, there is at present still room open for arguing that the future for the philosophy of mind cannot be just that of labouring the details of a physicalist theory of the mental, but it must also be that of inquiring further into the very nature of consciousness and the metaphysical reliability of the physicalist framework.

The papers collected in this volume provide in depth-explorations of the nature of subjectivity, the phenomenological structure of the self, its status as a metaphysical entity, its mode of interaction with, and existence within, a physical universe. As it should be, they display a variety of different perspectives and basic philosophical commitments. Taken together, they reflect not solely the systematic but also the *historical* complexity of the issue. The names of, among others, Plotinus, René Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, William James, and Edmund Husserl figure prominently in several of the following discussions as those of thinkers who still have much to contribute to the contemporary debate: as masters to be learnt from rather than, as is too common in the analytical literature, as sparring-partners who can be easily defeated.

The articles were originally presented at a conference organised at the University of Edinburgh to honour the work and philosophical legacy of Timothy L. S. Sprigge (1932–2007), former Professor of Logic and Metaphysics (1979–1989) in that same University and author of insightful works in the philosophy of mind and in speculative metaphysics. His original combination of panpsychism and absolute idealism – the theory that reality is a single whole that appears in the guise of a plurality of monad-like centres of experience – is a nice alternative, if not an antidote, to the scientistic physicalism that, as Kim observes, ‘shaped’ the debate over the mind-body problem in the last decades and that threatens to become the default position in contemporary philosophy of mind. Systems of revisionary metaphysics run counter to established assumptions, and rightly so; at the very least, they are an invitation and a challenge to further inquiry.

Neither the conference nor this volume would have been possible without the help of several persons and institutions. The Editors

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wish to acknowledge the help received from the Royal Institute of Philosophy, the University of Edinburgh, the British Society for the History of Philosophy, the Mind Association and the Scots Philosophical Association. A special word of thanks goes to Andy Clark, Jesper Kallestrup, Leemon McHenry and Dory Scaltsas for their encouragement and constant support.

The Editors

Sprigge's Ontology of Consciousness

LEEMON McHENRY

Abstract

Timothy Sprigge advanced an original synthesis of panpsychism and absolute idealism. He argued that consciousness is an irreducible, subjective reality that is only grasped by an introspective, phenomenological approach and constructed his ontology from what is revealed in the phenomenology. In defending the unique place of metaphysics in the pursuit of truth, he claimed that scientific investigation can never discover the essence of consciousness since it can only provide descriptions of structure and function in what we normally think of as physical existence. In this paper I present a critical evaluation of Sprigge's view focusing in particular on his conception of the nature of scientific inquiry vis-à-vis the ambitious project of his metaphysics. I argue that a naturalistic metaphysics provides a more adequate approach to the relation between science and metaphysics.

1. Introduction to Sprigge's Philosophy

Timothy Sprigge arrived at a solution to the problem of consciousness that became the basis for a metaphysical system in the grand style of Spinoza, Hegel, Bradley and Whitehead. He said he came to his view by a transformation of his philosophical outlook, one that enabled him to escape from a variety of absurdities into which he had been led by premises he did not think to question.¹ By the early 1970s he had been influenced by the most respected figures in British philosophy, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore and A. J. Ayer, but it was the serious study of the American philosophers, George Santayana and William James, who provided a more intellectually satisfying answer to his questions, and after a long period of gestation, the impact of Spinoza and Bradley put the final touches to his system. This transformation is much in evidence from the publication of his first book *Facts, Words and Beliefs* (1970) to *Santayana* (1974) and then with the publication of his magnum opus, *The Vindication of Absolute Idealism* (1983). In short, Sprigge traded the relative security and respectability of mainstream analytical philosophy for what he

¹ T. L. S. Sprigge, 'Consciousness' in *The Ontological Turn*, edited by M. S. Gram and E. D. Klemke (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1974), 115. Also see 'Orientations', *Philosophical Writings* 2 (1996), 98–100.

knew would be widely perceived as a retreat into soft-minded, muddle-headed metaphysics.

Sprigge began his career at the University of Cambridge where he worked with R. T. H. Redpath and then A. J. Ayer at University College, London. He became Lecturer and then Reader in philosophy at the School of English and American Studies at the University of Sussex, Regis Professor of Logic and Metaphysics at the University of Edinburgh and finally Emeritus Fellow retiring in Edinburgh and then Lewes, Sussex. It was in this final period that he produced three studies of the same large scale as the Victorian novels he used to read, *James and Bradley* (1993), *The God of Metaphysics* (2006) and *The Phenomenology of Thought* (unfinished). He always preferred the sustained chain of thought in book-length monographs to journal articles and claimed he seldom read the latter in spite of the fact that he himself contributed over a hundred articles and book chapters in the course of his career. In addition to his scholarly work on Spinoza, Bentham, James, Royce, Santayana, Bradley and Whitehead, and the construction of his own original system of metaphysics he called 'panpsychistic absolute idealism', Sprigge also produced important work in utilitarian ethics and was a leading figure in the animal rights movement in Britain.

In this paper I will examine the main features and motivating factors in Sprigge's view of consciousness, explain some of the metaphysics he constructed from his initial discovery and then offer a critical evaluation of the results. His philosophy is filled with creative connections between the thinkers he absorbed, unique insights into how these positions form a consistent whole and innovative arguments for the views advanced, but as with any system of philosophy, there are problems that need to be clearly exposed and debated.² Enthusiasm is no homage to genius.

2. The Irreducibility of Consciousness

W. V. Quine once said of philosophical curiosities about which he was in no position to cope: 'Closer to home, there are the mysteries of the mechanism of memory; also of consciousness – I am even at a loss for a satisfactory statement of what consciousness is, though nothing is

² For a critical evaluation of Sprigge's thought, see P. Basile and L. McHenry (eds), *Consciousness, Reality and Value: Essays in Honour of T. L. S. Sprigge* (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2007).

more familiar'.³ Regarding nothing more familiar, Sprigge claimed that he and 'Thomas Nagel offered, independently of each other, a definition of consciousness which amounts to saying that an individual is conscious at a certain time if there is an answer to the question what it was like being him, her, or it, at that time'.⁴ In fact he had published this view three years before⁵ Nagel's highly influential article, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?'⁶ He said that this essentially non-physical view of consciousness had been obvious to him since he had been engaged in serious philosophy and believed it long before he first used it in print.⁷ As Sprigge put it in a slightly more refined manner: 'An individual's state of consciousness at any moment is that concerning the character of which one is wondering if one asks oneself what it is like to be them just then'.⁸ This is obviously not an epistemological matter of our attempt to know what it is like to be some individual or creature, nor is an issue of how much of one's self-consciousness one currently grasps, but rather an ontological matter concerning the reality of subjective experience. In what seems like a direct reply to Quine, Sprigge claimed that 'Whenever the question 'What is consciousness' is asked, as though consciousness were something very mysterious, one can be sure that the treatment of the subject is likely to be unsatisfactory. For consciousness is the most familiar of realities and its nature should be easier to grasp than is the nature of anything else'.⁹ Should there be a lack of clarity in this formulation, Sprigge claimed one gets nearer to such a statement of the essence of consciousness as that in which being is one with its own non-discursive

³ W. V. Quine, *Quine in Dialogue*, edited by D. Føllesdal and D. Quine (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 28.

⁴ T. L. S. Sprigge, 'The Importance of Subjectivity: An Inaugural Lecture', *Inquiry* 25 (1982), 146.

⁵ T. L. S. Sprigge, 'Final Causes', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 71 (1971), 166–8.

⁶ T. Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974), 435–50. See also Nagel's acknowledgement to Sprigge in *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 15n. Nagel also acknowledges in the same note that B. A. Farrell had asked in 1950 what it would be like to be a bat but dismissed the difficulty for materialism.

⁷ T. L. S. Sprigge, 'Consciousness', *Synthese* 98 (1994), 79.

⁸ T. L. S. Sprigge, 'Is Consciousness Mysterious?', *Anthropology & Philosophy* 3:2 (1999), 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

knowing of itself.¹⁰ This is sometimes called ‘phenomenological consciousness’.¹¹ It is the view that what makes a state phenomenally conscious is that there is something ‘it is like’ to be in that state. For both Sprigge and Nagel, this is to assert that consciousness has an essentially inner, subjective nature that is not specifiable in any physical terms. Consciousness is available to us simply because we are conscious. We know it as something that has its own appreciative sense of itself rather than by description.

The inner subjectivity of what it is like to be a person and ‘the fact that he is conscious does not follow logically – however firmly it follows inferentially – from any fact about him of a physical kind, whether it concern the patterns of his behaviour, the occurrence of various computer type processes within his brain, or whatever’.¹² The notion was reinforced in *The Phenomenology of Thought* when Sprigge recounted a point made by John Wisdom to the effect that the concept of mind has little or nothing to do with the concept of the brain.¹³ After the death of some eminent thinker, let us say Albert Einstein, his brain is examined. But to everyone’s amazement all that there is inside his head is hay! The very bases of science seem destroyed, but no one decides that Einstein never had any thoughts. We all believe that consciousness, in the normal case, at least, depends on the brain, however, our conception of the brain does not imply anything about consciousness and vice versa. Was the concept of consciousness enriched by the discovery of nerve-cells seen in brain slices or the discovery of the electrochemical activity of the neurotransmitters in the same way as our concept of combustion was enriched by the discovery of oxygen? Sprigge argued that it did not. While there is a causal connection between the grey and white gooey stuff normally found in a person’s skull and consciousness, there is no logically necessary relation between the two, and the concept of consciousness remains relatively untouched by any advances in the neurosciences.

Sprigge’s discovery about consciousness might very well seem obvious to us in retrospect, and this I suggest is because of the

¹⁰ T. L. S. Sprigge, ‘The Importance of Subjectivity’, *op. cit.*, 146–7. Sprigge credits F. H. Bradley with articulating this view. See also his ‘Knowledge of Subjectivity’, *Theoria to Theory* 14 (1981), 320.

¹¹ N. Block, ‘On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness’, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 18 (1995), 227.

¹² T. L. S. Sprigge, ‘Consciousness’, *op. cit.*, 79.

¹³ T. L. S. Sprigge, *The Phenomenology of Thought*, edited by L. McHenry (unpublished manuscript, Sprigge Archives, Edinburgh University Library), Part 2, Chapter 1, 17.

influence that Nagel's paper has had over thirty years of discussion, but in the late 1960s when Sprigge was making his case, he said: 'a striking feature of contemporary English philosophy is the insistence that philosophers since Descartes have been led astray by incoherent notions of a realm of private experience...'.¹⁴ Such was the stranglehold of logical positivism and behaviourism at the time. The dominant views of mind shaped by Ryle and Wittgenstein amounted to a denial of consciousness in the sense in which its existence is taken as a basic fact of the reality of our subjective experience.¹⁵ But there is, Sprigge argued, nothing incoherent or absurd about an intrinsic quality exemplifiable by private experience. In fact, following Descartes on this one point, he agrees our knowledge of our own consciousness is basic and certain. At each moment there is a quite definite character, however easy or difficult it is to identify this character about the private aspects of one's stream of consciousness. So, there is something it is like to be a person, a cat, and indeed probably almost all of the creatures in the animal kingdom. The main difference between human consciousness and other sentient creatures is that our consciousness is largely though not exclusively preoccupied with linguistic discourse or various types of symbolic representations of our experience. But it is quite clear that there is a definite character of the experience of other creatures even if at some very low level it is merely one of a dull throb of existence, a faint awareness or a vague sense of passage. Sprigge did not think that there was something it is like to be a mere aggregate like a cloud or a mountain even though in his view there is something it is like to be one of the ultimate constituents of all things and indeed the whole universe itself which he conceived of as one single substance in the fashion of Spinoza and Bradley.

The view of experience advanced by Sprigge begins with an approach to the study of consciousness that was pioneered by William James and Edmund Husserl.¹⁶ He thought that the phenomenological approach was the only way to understand consciousness and that no one has come closer to illuminating its nature than James. What it is like to be a conscious human being is best grasped from within and described in watery metaphors of drops of

¹⁴ T. L. S. Sprigge, 'The Privacy of Experience', *Mind* **78** (1969), 512.

¹⁵ T. L. S. Sprigge, 'Consciousness', *op. cit.*, 80.

¹⁶ W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vols 1 & 2 (London: Macmillan and Co, 1901); E. Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, translated by J. S. Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).

experience flowing together in a stream of mental discourse, continually fading into the past and advancing into the future. The lesson from James is 'a habit of directing one's attention at a certain reality, one's own total experience, and bearing the character of what one then notes vividly in mind whenever theorizing about mind or related matters'.¹⁷ The crucial method here involves introspection, empathy, and insight into the necessities present in what this approach reveals. As James says: 'That unsharable feeling which each one of us has ... may be disparaged for its egoism, may be sneered at as unscientific, but it is the one thing that fills up the measure of our concrete actuality, and any would-be existent that should lack such a feeling, or its analogue, would be a piece of reality only half made up'.¹⁸

One becomes especially aware of James' accomplishment by seeing how badly philosophy is done in complete neglect of this approach, as for instance one finds in the sort of identity theory of mind and brain in which consciousness is treated as a theoretical entity invoked to explain certain sorts of behaviour. All the wrong turns in contemporary philosophy of mind that have obscured our path to the essence of consciousness have resulted from preoccupations with abstractions rather than with absorption in the lived character of conscious experience. This includes what Daniel Dennett has referred to as a 'tormented snarl of increasingly convoluted and bizarre thought experiments ... and a bounty of other sidetrackers and time-wasters',¹⁹ though obviously Dennett and Sprigge are odd bedfellows in this complaint. For Sprigge the phenomenological study of consciousness is the foundation of other inquiries. Thus unlike Nagel's limited point, Sprigge developed this crucial insight about the essence of consciousness in a systematic manner both for his metaphysics and ethics. Conscious states, or more generally sentient states, with their subjective, first-person ontology are the true reality.

So, for Sprigge, this is the answer to the not-so-mysterious question 'what is consciousness?' As for the more difficult question of how consciousness is related to the brain, he argued that the first thing to know in charting the relation is to know what each term is,

¹⁷ T. L. S. Sprigge, 'The Distinctiveness of American Philosophy' in *Two Centuries of Philosophy in America*, edited by Peter Caws (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 205.

¹⁸ W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 499.

¹⁹ D. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 369.

and that he had illuminated the nature of the former in his phenomenological consciousness. Given that the relation of mind and brain is one of identity, and given further that Sprigge has been successful in capturing the essence of consciousness as subjective inwardness, then for him the substance of brain activity must consist of particulars that have the same character.²⁰ From this point of departure, he constructed a panpsychist ontology in which consciousness or sentience is omnipresent in the universe.

3. The Limits of Scientific Investigation

The problem of consciousness, as Sprigge saw it, is that it refuses to cooperate with the prevailing materialistic paradigm; it is the stubborn irreducibility of consciousness or the failure to explain how neurophysiological processes of the brain have any connection at all to that nothing more familiar phenomena of consciousness that remains the major stumbling block. It is, he said, the problem that has 'bedeviled philosophy'.²¹ More recent writers have identified this as the 'hard problem', one that might very well be intractable because human beings simply don't have the intelligence or cognitive tools designed for understanding consciousness in the same way dogs don't have enough wattage in the bulb to do mathematics.²² At least here we seem to know enough to know what we can't know, but Sprigge disagreed. Somehow this attitude of the 'new mysterians' such as Nagel and McGinn has escaped notice that it is defeatist. Why aren't all the unending philosophical problems just like the hard problem of consciousness equally intractable or hopeless? In Sprigge's idealist reversal of the hard problem, it is not consciousness that we fail to understand; rather in a move reminiscent of Berkeley, it is the very concept of physical matter that we do not understand. So, any notion that the nature or essence of consciousness is something that awaits the results of neurophysiological research to be understood is fundamentally misguided.

Sprigge argued that our knowledge of our own states of consciousness which are irreducibly subjective and private will be threatening

²⁰ T. L. S. Sprigge, 'Is Consciousness Mysterious?', *op. cit.*, 19.

²¹ T. L. S. Sprigge, *The Phenomenology of Thought*, *op. cit.*, Part 1, Chapter 1.

²² C. McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 47.