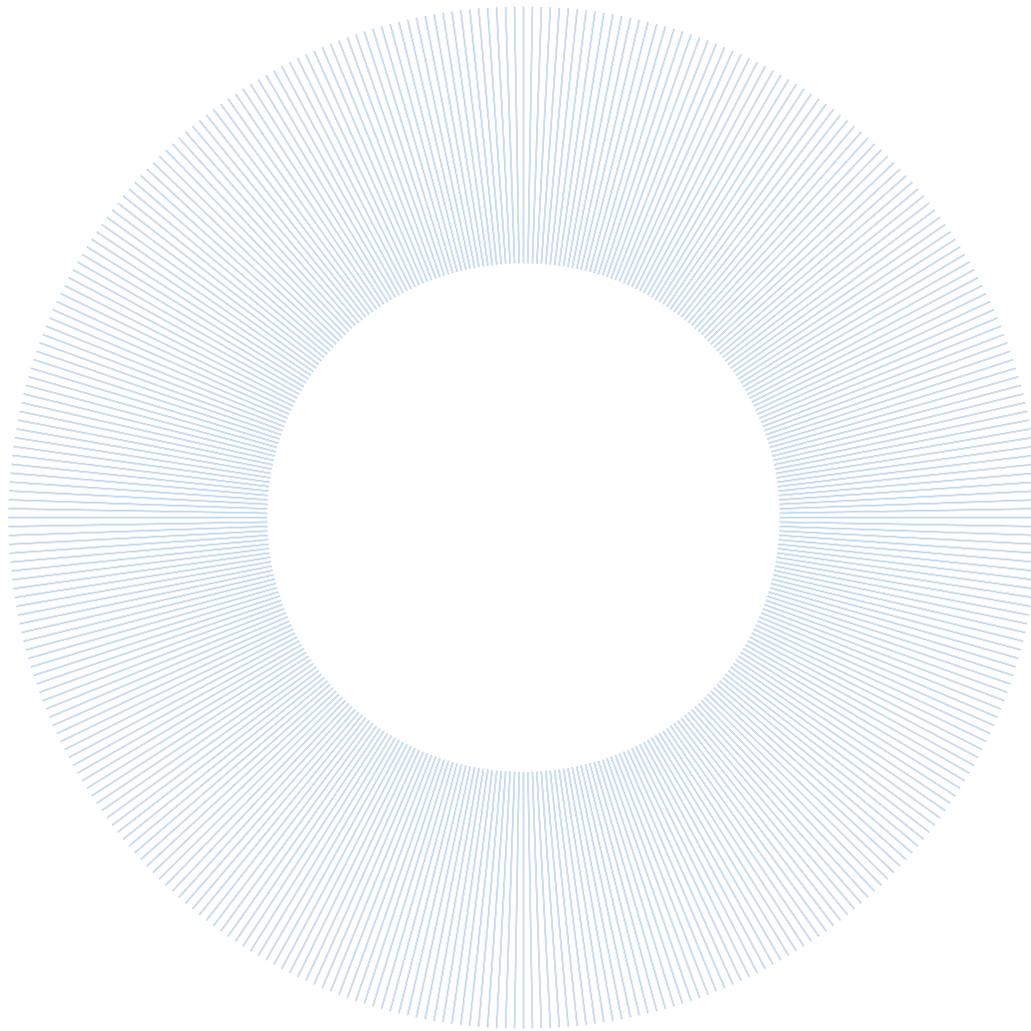


# The Mystery of the Mystery of Consciousness



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## THE MYSTERY OF THE MYSTERY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

*This paper takes up what has been called the 'hard problem of consciousness': how can we account for the presence of consciousness in the universe as described by physics? The problem can seem not simply hard but utterly hopeless. One possibility is that the problem is of our own making. We begin with various assumptions that yield a space of possible answers, none of which carries conviction. Two assumptions are identified and shown to be optional. When these are replaced by plausible alternatives the hard problem becomes, if not immediately amenable to solution, at least less hopeless.*



The philosopher is confronted not by one complex many-dimensional picture, the unity of which, such as it is, he must come to appreciate; but by two pictures of essentially the same order of complexity, each of which purports to be a complete picture of man-in-the-world, and which, after separate scrutiny, he must fuse into one vision. Let me refer to these two perspectives, respectively, as the *manifest* and the *scientific* images of man-in-the-world (Sellars, 1963, p. 5).

### *The Manifest and Scientific Images*

In some quarters, consciousness is regarded as the final frontier, the sole remaining mystery of the universe around us. The idea is not that we have answered all the questions posed by the physical and social sciences, that we have the final theory, or that there are no remaining unresolved issues in physics or chemistry or biology. Rather, the thought is that we have some idea how we might go about answering run-of-the-mill scientific questions, but when it comes to consciousness, we hit a wall.

On the one hand, consciousness is a familiar, perhaps the most familiar, feature of our lives. We are all conscious and, except for periods of unconsciousness when we are asleep or anesthetized, we all continuously undergo conscious experiences. On the other hand, it is hard to see how these fit into the world as it is revealed by the physical sciences. The more we learn about the brain, the harder it is to see how what goes on inside our heads could give rise to what Colin McGinn calls 'Technicolor phenomenology', qualitatively imbued conscious experiences (McGinn, 1989).

Precisely because the problem seems hopeless from a scientific perspective, it has all the earmarks of a philosophical puzzle. If I am right, the problem is largely self-inflicted in the sense that it arises from a collection of assumptions that yield a space of possible solutions, none of which is especially satisfying. A way out is not to be found by endlessly retracing our steps through this space, but in examining some of the assumptions that give rise to the problem in the first place.

I am not going to solve the mystery of consciousness here, I am going to speak informally about the nature of philosophy, about various sources of the mystery, and leave you with some speculative remarks as to how the fly might escape the fly bottle. This will disappoint philosophers invested in the presuppositions I want to challenge and those looking for detailed arguments. I do not

think that we got where we are owing to unassailable arguments, however, and I do not believe that such arguments are what is required to set us on a different course.

### *The Nature of Philosophy*

Philosophy is hard, but not for the reasons those exposed to it in academic settings often think. Philosophy is frequently technical and difficult to understand. Philosophers take simple ideas and represent them in a way calculated to shock and amaze, often in a formal idiom that gives them an undeserved air of profundity and rigor. It is important to recognize that formal techniques are tools, and it is all too easy to get caught up with the tools and lose track of the ends the tools were meant to serve. On the one hand, you can be good with the tools, a virtuoso, without ever saying much of philosophical interest, without being a good philosopher. On the other hand, the memorable philosophical theses are not the products of knock-down, logically unimpeachable arguments. Indeed, few philosophers are persuaded to accept a big idea on the basis of an argument. Something else is going on.

More people are engaged in publishing papers on philosophical topics today than at any other time in human history. We have record numbers of PhDs toiling on the fashionable problems, so it would be natural to expect steady progress plus an occasional breakthrough discovery. This is not how it works, however. Philosophy resembles art. Just as bad art is not art, so bad philosophy is not philosophy. Sadly most philosophers are not philosophers. This might seem unforgivably condescending were it not for the fact that I include myself among the ranks of philosophers who are not.

Enough pontificating – for now. There will be more later

### *The Manifest Image and the Scientific Image*

One way to locate the mystery of consciousness is to recognize it as one aspect of a more general problem, the problem of reconciling our everyday experience of the universe – what Wilfrid Sellars called the ‘manifest image’ – with the ‘scientific image’, the picture of the universe we obtain from the sciences, especially fundamental physics. (See the quotation at the head of this article.) The tension is nicely illustrated in a much-quoted passage from A. S. Eddington, who, some three decades earlier, had set out to write his Gifford Lectures by, in his words, drawing up ‘my chairs to my two tables’.

Two tables! Yes; there are duplicates of every object about me – two tables, two chairs, two pens.

One of them has been familiar to me from earliest years. It is a commonplace object of that environment which I call the world. How shall I describe it? It has extension; it is comparatively permanent; it is coloured; above all it is substantial.

Table No. 2 is my scientific table. It is a more recent acquaintance and I do not feel so familiar with it. It does not belong to the world previously mentioned – that world which spontaneously appears around me when I open my eyes, though how much of it is objective and how much subjective I do not here consider. It is part of a world which in more devious ways has forced itself on my attention. My scientific table is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the table itself (Eddington, 1928, pp. ix–x).

Eddington's first table is at home in Sellars' manifest image, the picture of the universe that guides our everyday interactions with our surroundings – including the interactions of scientists with instruments in their laboratories. The second table belongs to the picture of the universe we obtain from physics. The difficulty, remarked by both Eddington and Sellars, is to understand how these images are related.

Philosophers have not been shy in suggesting ways in which the two images might be reconciled. Four examples are worth mentioning here.

- (1) The manifest image is an illusion promoted by soft-headed philosophers, journalists and romantics disdainful of science.
- (2) The manifest image presents reality as it is; the scientific image serves merely to facilitate our endeavors in the universe as we experience it.
- (3) The manifest image reveals 'levels of reality' dependent on but distinct from the fundamental physical level.
- (4) The manifest image provides a serviceable representation of what the scientific image reveals.

The options can be illustrated by reference to Eddington's two tables. The first option takes only the scientific table to be real, Eddington's everyday table to be a fiction, a mere appearance. The second option accepts the everyday table as real, and regards the scientific table as another kind of fiction, an expression of abstract mathematical principles we deploy in predicting and manipulating objects and goings-on in the manifest image. Both of these options have been influential in philosophy and in science from the Presocratics to the present day.

The third option is a latter-day invention of philosophers calling themselves 'nonreductive physicalists'. The idea is that physics affords our best guess as to the nature of 'fundamental' reality. But there is more to reality than fundamental reality. Reality comprises a hierarchy of levels, each level distinct from but in some way dependent on the level beneath it. There is the fundamental physical level, the biological level, the psychological level, the social level, and so on. In general, higher levels are not 'reducible to' lower levels: you cannot formulate the truths of meteorology or geology or biology, to say nothing of psychology, in terms at home in fundamental physics. This is taken to show that all of these irreducible truths concern distinct domains: the domain of physics, the biological domain, etc.

On such a view, both of Eddington's tables exist. The everyday table occupies a higher level, dependent on but still distinct from the scientific table; the one is not reducible to the other. The scientific image depicts the fundamental physical level, the manifest image includes depictions of successively higher levels. It is this approach to the reconciliation problem, the problem of reconciling the manifest and scientific images, that, as I hope to convince you, is the source of the mystery of consciousness.

I shall postpone discussion of the fourth option, noting only that it regards the scientific image as providing an account of what it is that the manifest image is an image of. Eddington's scientific table *is* his everyday table.

## The Mystery

Although much has been made of the mystery of consciousness, I find it increasingly difficult to convey with a clear conscience. To appreciate the mystery, to live it, you need to think as philosophers have thought about minds and their place in the universe. (And in this context you would do well to bear in mind that philosophers are not the only philosophers.) Part of what I shall suggest is that these ways of thinking are (a) optional, and (b) themselves largely responsible for the mystery. Resolving the mystery of consciousness requires our finding our way out of the fly bottle.

A good place to begin is with Descartes, the most celebrated historical source of the mystery. Descartes held that the universe contained two kinds of substance: material substances and mental substance. (Substances here are not stuffs – air or water, for instance – but particular objects: tomatoes, planets, electrons.) Each kind of substance is identified with a particular attribute. Material substances are extended, mental substances are conscious. (Descartes speaks of extension and *thought*, but by thoughts he means something closer to what we would call conscious states of mind.) All the properties of a substance are modes of its defining attribute. Thus all the properties of material bodies are modes of extension, ways of being extended (which would include shapes, sizes and spatial location), and all the properties of mental substances are modes of consciousness, ways of being conscious (which would include thoughts, judgments, sensations, images).

The attributes of thought or consciousness and extension are distinct. Because substances *are* their attributes, no material substance could be conscious and no conscious substance could be extended. Thus it is that the mental–material distinction is what Descartes called a *real distinction*, a distinction in reality, not simply a distinction in point of view or conception.

To understand the difference, recall *Phosphorus* and *Hesperus*, the morning star and the evening star. Once these were believed to be two stars, once the distinction between *Phosphorus* and *Hesperus* was thought to be a real distinction. Astronomers then discovered that the distinction between *Phosphorus* and *Hesperus* was a distinction of conception only, *Phosphorus* and *Hesperus* were in fact one and the same heavenly body: Venus.

Nowadays most philosophers dismiss Descartes's dualism of substances as hopelessly quaint: there are not two *substances*, minds and bodies, or minds and brains. There are just complex bodies endowed with seriously complex nervous systems. Nevertheless dualism – and Descartes's real distinction – survived in the guise of a dualism of *properties*. Mental properties were presumed to be really distinct in kind from physical properties. And now the problem became how could something physical, a brain, say, support mental (that is, nonphysical) properties?

Enter functionalism. I have emphasized the *qualitative* nature of consciousness, but functionalists characterize states of mind by reference to their 'causal roles', their typical causes and effects, relations they bear to sensory inputs, behavioral outputs and to other mental states. To be in pain, for instance, might be to be in a state caused by tissue damage or excessive heat or pressure, a state that in turn produces aversive behavior. There is no special problem in thinking that brains could include such states, so pains – and presumably other conscious states – could be brain states. Problem solved!

Not quite. Pains do indeed seem to be states that 'play the pain role', but pains are also *painful*. Pains have a distinctive and highly unpleasant qualitative character that is altogether ignored by

functionalism. And this brings us back to the question, how could we locate qualitatively rich conscious experiences in brains?

Think of your experience of a ripe tomato or the taste of anchovies on a pizza or the sound of a clarinet. The qualities of such experiences seem utterly unlike qualities of your brain, much less the quarks and leptons that make up your brain. In fact, it seems crazy to suppose that quarks and leptons have qualities at all. Maybe qualities are all mental. Qualities that seem to us to be in the world are really qualities of *us*, qualities of our conscious experiences that we 'project' onto the world.

If qualities permeating the manifest image are completely absent from the scientific image, however, what can we say about the nature of objects figuring in the scientific image? Perhaps such objects are characterized by *powers*. The charge of an electron, for instance, or its mass are not qualities, but capacities or powers of the electron that determine how it behaves or would behave in concert with other particles.

The resulting picture – what Peter Unger has dubbed 'scientificism' – is that qualities are exclusively mental (Unger, 2006). The universe as described by science is a colorless, odorless, silent realm empty of qualities. What makes consciousness problematic is its qualitative character. The real mystery boils down to the question: how could you get something qualitative from something that is not?

Various answers have been proposed, many echoing the four options discussed earlier.

Some argue that the qualitative realm is a mere appearance. That might be so, but then how do we account for the appearance? If colors, for instance, are just in your mind, this seems to locate minds outside the physical world: dualism redux. But then how are minds – or their qualitative aspects – related to everything else?

Some argue that conscious qualities 'emerge' from nonqualitative, nonmental collections of particles organized in the right way. Neuroscientists sometimes describe brain states as the 'substrate' of consciousness. Unless you can say what this kind of emergence is, how it works, however, saying that consciousness is an emergent phenomenon is only to say that consciousness is in some unexplained way a product of physical processes, and this simply reinstates the original problem.

More recently, some philosophers have defended what they call panpsychism, the idea that conscious qualities 'go all the way down'. Just as brains have mass because their constituent particles have mass, brains are conscious because their constituent particles possess conscious, experiential qualities.

Panpsychism feels like a desperate, last-ditch move in the face of hopeless odds. But perhaps the odds are stacked, perhaps the situation appears hopeless because we have made it so. Earlier, I suggested that the mystery or problem of consciousness might be largely of our own devising. The mystery stems from our seeking a solution within a space of possible solutions constrained by a bevy of substantive, but dubious, presuppositions. What happens when these are replaced?

## *Escaping the Fly Bottle*

The lynchpin of current approaches to consciousness is Descartes's insistence on a real distinction between the mental and the physical. In modern dress this amounts to the claim that there are two species of property, mental and physical. Mental properties are nonphysical; physical properties are nonmental. Physical properties are nonqualitative powers or capacities possessed by physical things. Mental properties are qualitative and impotent – they would have to be; potency belongs to the physical.

In opposition to Descartes, I propose to join forces with Spinoza (and his twentieth-century spokesman, Donald Davidson) and contend that the mental–physical distinction is not a real distinction, but one of conception only. In its plainest form, this is just to say that we have mental and physical descriptions of goings-on in the universe, but anything that could be given a mental description could be given a physical description: one occurrence, two kinds of description.

This is not 'reductionism'. There is no prospect of analyzing, paraphrasing or replacing a mental description with ones framed in terms borrowed from fundamental physics. And, if you are still alert after all the hand-waving, you might recognize this as an implicit affirmation of the fourth option among the approaches to the reconciliation problem, the problem of harmonizing the manifest and scientific images. The manifest image affords true descriptions of the universe. The scientific image tells us *what* we are describing, what the manifest image is an image *of*.

I shall not say more in defense of my rejection of the real distinction between the mental and the physical (for that see Heil, 2012). I merely note it as an option that you would do well to take seriously. Even if you do, this would not immediately address the problem of conscious *qualities*. Consciousness and the manifest image are qualitatively rich, but the physical universe as depicted in the scientific image is thought to be qualitatively bereft. Bluntly put, physical properties appear to be powers, not qualities and mental properties appear to be qualities, not powers. And this would seem to reintroduce a real distinction between the mental and the physical.

I accept that talk of powers and talk of qualities are distinct ways of talking, but I deny that this reflects a distinction in reality: the power–quality distinction is, I claim, one of conception only: properties – intrinsic properties of concrete objects – are quite generally *powerful qualities*. You can conceive of a given property as a quality or as a power, in so doing you are engaged in 'abstraction', what Locke called 'partial consideration'. You are considering, not two properties, not 'aspects' of a single property, you are considering a property in two different ways.

Consider the sphericity of this tomato. Its sphericity is a paradigmatic quality. But by virtue of being spherical the tomato rolls or would roll down an inclined plane, would make a circular concave impression in the carpet, would pass smoothly through a circular hole. Sphericity is the very model of a powerful quality. I believe that what goes for sphericity goes for every property. Properties endow their possessors with qualities. These same properties are responsible for their possessors' powers. Again, I shall not pause to defend this thesis, but offer it as an alternative worthy of your consideration.

This approach to properties has interesting implications for functionalist accounts of the mind. Functionalists hold that mental states are characterized by their causal profiles. Something is a pain if it is a state produced by what you would regard as typical causes of pains, and its effects are those typical of pains. Something counts as a pain if it has this causal profile. The

problem, noted earlier, is that this would seem to leave out what is most salient about pains, their qualitative character: pains are *painful*.

Think of it this way. Functionalism identifies mental properties with powers, powers to be produced in particular ways and to produce various outcomes. This specification omits mention of qualities. But now suppose that properties are powerful qualities. That would open the way to reversing the functionalist's order of explanation. Something is not a pain because it has the right causal profile, because it 'plays the pain role', it plays the pain role because it is a pain, because it is qualitatively *painful*.

My suggestion then is that we reject two fundamental dichotomies that are at least partly responsible for the mystery of consciousness: the distinction between mental and physical qualities, and the closely-related distinction between qualities and powers. Both distinctions are, I claim, distinctions of conception only.

Although the bifurcation of the mental and the physical and the related bifurcation of qualities and powers are the most prominent sources of the mystery of consciousness, let me mention one more impediment to a sensible understanding of consciousness and a reconciliation of the manifest and scientific images. I have in mind the tendency to conflate features of things perceived and features of *experiences* of those features. In the 1950s, U. T. Place dubbed this mistake as the *phenomenological fallacy* (Place, 1956: pp. 48–50). When you look at the tomato, you experience something red. Philosophers sometimes describe this as your having a red experience. But your experience is not red; the tomato is red. The redness you experience belongs to the tomato, not to your experience of the tomato. So, from the fact that you are 'having a red experience' despite your brain's not being red – or there being no tomato-shaped red occurrence in your brain – in no way shows that your experience of the tomato is not an occurrence in your brain.

When philosophers describe 'Technicolor experiences', when they revel in the phenomenology of experience, often what they describe are qualitatively rich features of what is being experienced: the redness of a tomato or a sunset, the sound of a clarinet, the feel of hot sand under your feet at the beach. If you strip these qualities from the objects and locate them in the mind, then it will indeed be hard to find a place for minds in the universe as described by physics. Conscious experiences undoubtedly have qualities – what does not? But why imagine that they are these? If you are worried about how to locate qualities of conscious experience in the universe, you should be clear on *which* qualities are at issue. Otherwise your task really *is* hopeless.

### *Goose Sauce*

*Is that it?* Nothing I have said wholly demystifies consciousness. That has not been my aim. Rather, I have wanted to suggest that seemingly insurmountable difficulties in understanding how qualities, including conscious qualities, arise in the manifest image are on a par. In this regard, there is no *special* problem about consciousness.

Consider the tomato, and concentrate on the tomato's color. How is it that when you put together colorless quarks and leptons in the right way you get something red? Who knows! This is not something we lose sleep over, however, probably because we know that, when you put the right things together in the right way, this is what you get. We assume that there is a reason for this, but finding the reason is not a high priority.

The mistake would be to assume that qualities are nonphysical add-ons, that qualities are absent from the universe that figures in the scientific image. We are unaware of qualities of the fundamental things because we are unaware of the fundamental things. We know about electrons and quarks only by their effects on things found in the manifest image, including particle detectors. But, if I am right that properties are powerful qualities, then properties of quarks and electrons are powerful qualities. Science, as noted already, 'abstracts' from the qualitative nature of things and considers only their powers or capacities.

So qualities are there from the beginning. How the qualities of ordinary things, tomatoes, for instance, result from combinations of particles is anybody's guess. This, I suggest, is how it is with consciousness. If you insist on a clear transparent route from the quarks and leptons to consciousness, you are setting the bar impossibly high, you are asking neuroscience to do what you would not dream of asking a chemist or physicist to do when it comes to qualities of everyday objects. What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.



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*Insights*

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