

Philosophers on Consciousness

Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| Illustrations | x |
| Contributors | xi |
| Acknowledgements | xii |
| Preface | xiii |
| | |
| 1 Why Consciousness Matters | 1 |
| <i>Gregory Miller</i> | |
| 2 The Grand Illusion | 11 |
| <i>Susan Blackmore</i> | |
| 3 The Hard Problem | 25 |
| <i>David Chalmers</i> | |
| 4 A Change of Heart | 39 |
| <i>Frank Jackson</i> | |
| 5 The Given | 49 |
| <i>Michelle Montague</i> | |
| 6 A Biologist's Perspective | 63 |
| <i>Massimo Pigliucci</i> | |
| 7 The Hornswoggle Problem | 75 |
| <i>Patricia Churchland</i> | |
| 8 Illusionism | 89 |
| <i>Keith Frankish</i> | |
| 9 Closing the Theatre | 101 |
| <i>Daniel Dennett</i> | |
| 10 The Denial | 113 |
| <i>Galen Strawson</i> | |
| 11 Galileo's Error | 127 |
| <i>Philip Goff</i> | |
| 12 The World as Consciousness | 141 |
| <i>Miri Albahari & Jack Symes</i> | |
| | |
| Notes & Sources | 153 |
| Index | 161 |

Chapter Nine

Closing the Theatre

Daniel Dennett

Introduction

The *sound* of rain against your window, the *sweet* taste of honey on toast, the *adrenaline rush* of stealing the hairdryer from a hotel bathroom. These experiences are for us; they play out to our inner selves in the sanctum of our minds, on our own private theatre screens. For many philosophers, it's obvious that we know *what it is* to have these experiences . . . but not to Daniel Dennett.

Since 1971, Dennett has carried out his research at Tufts University, where he is currently Professor of Philosophy and the Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies. Dennett might be *the* world's most distinguished philosopher. His research has long been at the forefront of cognitive science and philosophy of mind, but he's far from your ivory tower academic. Without compromising the complexity of his ideas, Dennett always writes accessibly, which has secured his status as a global thought leader.¹

There have already been plenty of references to Dennett's work throughout this book, which should give you some indication of his enormous impact on the field. Dennett believes that science will be able to explain consciousness. Like Frankish, he thinks consciousness is an illusion – nothing more than a trick of the brain. He also shares Churchland and Pigliucci's scepticism of unrealistic thought experiments and overly speculative metaphysics. In short, his empirically minded philosophy doesn't suffer fools gladly.

Out of the armchair

Before we discuss the nature of consciousness, I wonder what you think about the purpose of philosophy more generally. In your view, what is 'philosophy'?

Philosophy is what you're doing when you don't know what the right questions are. Once you get the right questions and you're answering them, that is not typically philosophy.

In that case, do you think that philosophy makes progress?

Actually, it does. The whole history of science is the history of the progress that philosophy has made. If you go back to Aristotle, it was all philosophy. Aristotle figured out some pretty good questions in mathematics, astronomy and physics. One of the last sciences to be carved off from philosophy is psychology, and some would say it's had a rather premature birth. There's still lots of confusion in psychology about what the right questions are.

So, philosophy's role is to sort out the questions before passing them on to the scientists? Is that how philosophy makes progress?

That's right. Being a philosopher means experiencing that uneasy feeling that comes with having no landmarks, nothing to hang on to and no pigeonholes to put things in. If that doesn't sound like your cup of tea, then don't be a philosopher.

Philosophy of mind often gives me an uneasy feeling! What is it that drew you towards the subject?

I took an introductory course in philosophy as a freshman in college. Amongst many other classic texts, I read Descartes's *Meditations* – I quite vividly remember thinking, 'Well, this is fascinating, but *wrong!* I think I'll spend an afternoon or two and see if I can set this straight.' I've been drawn to philosophy of mind ever since reading Descartes. It struck me at the time that dualism – Descartes's idea that there's an immaterial mind that interacts with the material body – was such a non-starter. It just couldn't be right! Not that I knew any science back then, it was just an intuition that I had. Eventually, I took a course in epistemology and realized, 'Oh, I can see where this is going wrong,' and it just grew out of that!

René Descartes is often referred to as 'the father of modern philosophy'. *Meditations on First Philosophy* is traditionally one of the first texts that students will come across.

Do you have any thoughts on the best way we can approach philosophy? What advice would you give to somebody who's looking to tackle 'the big questions'?

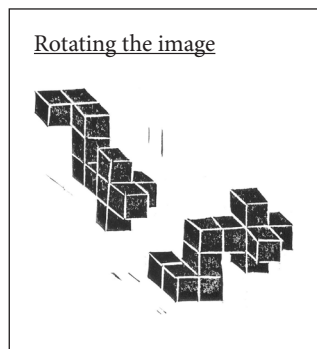
Don't restrict your diet to philosophy. All the great work in philosophy is enriched, guided and provoked by work in other fields. You really need to know more than what you learn from the armchair. If you don't have a background in other areas (such as science, mathematics and history), you may be very clever, but you're in an atmosphere that's too thin to do any flying.

Third-person phenomenology

One way we might learn things from the armchair is through the phenomenological method. Simply put, this approach says that if we introspect on our experiences and describe them in enough detail, we'll be able to reach metaphysical conclusions. I believe you label this approach 'autophenomenology'. In contrast, you've suggested that there is a better way of studying consciousness, which you've given the rather ominous title – as you claim yourself – 'heterophenomenology'.² What is heterophenomenology and why should we prefer it over autophenomenology?

Autophenomenology is phenomenology from the first-person point of view; you just sit there and introspect. Heterophenomenology is when you ask other people to introspect and get them to participate in experiments; ask them lots of questions, get them to express themselves by pressing buttons, record their behaviour – measure all kinds of things! What you glean from this is their account of *what it's like* to be them. Unlike heterophenomenology, I don't think you can do autophenomenology scientifically. After all, science has to involve data that can be objectively verified. That doesn't mean heterophenomenology rules out data about consciousness, it just means that you have to use third parties to gather and interpret the data.

Let's take a simple example. We ask a person, 'What are you doing?' and they say, 'I'm rotating the image on the left to see if it lines up with the image on the right.' Okay, so that's what the person thinks they're doing. Their belief that they *are* rotating an image might be true or false. We don't know until we do some experiments to see whether or not it's plausible that they're doing what they think they're doing! However, even if they



are wrong about what's going on in their brain, there is something they are right about: *what it's like* to be them. Heterophenomenology is *the way* of taking consciousness seriously.

So, we need to check whether or not somebody's first-person account is true. In your example, it's true that they *feel* as if they're rotating the shape, but they might not *actually* be rotating the shape. You put this nicely in your book, *Consciousness Explained*, when you say: 'You are not authoritative about what is happening in you, but only about what seems to be happening in you.'³ Could you elaborate on a point you just made? Is heterophenomenology preferable to autophenomenology because it allows us to remove first-person error?

When I describe heterophenomenology, I'm simply describing the method that's been used for one hundred years in experimental psychology, psychophysics and cognitive psychology. We have a wealth of information on *what it's like* to be people, and one of the things we know is that they're often wrong. They just aren't the authorities they think they are about what's going on inside their own heads!

Heterophenomenology allows us to calibrate the first-person. I compare it with the exercise of going into a native village and learning the language. Yes, probe the villagers and ask them thousands of questions about their beliefs, but don't argue with them! Take their beliefs as their beliefs. Establish the world according to these people and try not to contaminate your account of their beliefs with your own views. That's doable, with limitations. It's the best science can do at extracting an unbiased description of how that person or group sees the world.

The philosopher Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) is often referred to as the 'father of psychology'. Wundt began to study the mind scientifically, rather than through philosophical speculation. This marked the birth of experimental psychology: the study of the mind through experiments.

Psychophysics explores the relationship between matter and mind. It asks: what are the connections between physical stimuli in the brain and the mental experiences they produce?

Cognitive psychology is a specialized area of experimental psychology. It investigates the internal processes of the brain by observing the behaviour of participants performing cognitive tasks.

If we wrote down everything a participant had to say about their experience, what should we do with the data?

With regard to each item in that set of data, there are two possibilities: either they're right about their experience or they're wrong. If they're right, we need to verify their belief by explaining how it seems to them and why they are right. To use our example from earlier, we need to show that they are indeed turning the shape. To do that, we would have to explain how the brain does that particular thing. If they're wrong, then we need to explain why. We have to say: 'We have no reason for thinking that the brain can turn the shape, but this is where the illusion comes from.' This approach leaves nothing out that I think we should take seriously. Heterophenomenology maximally extracts the value from the first-person point of view!

The Cartesian Theatre

One of the things that you've tried to convince many people of is the unhelpfulness and failure of what you've called the 'Cartesian Theatre'. What is the Cartesian Theatre?

The Cartesian Theatre is the idea that there is a place in the brain where 'it all comes together'. For Descartes, this was the pineal gland. It's not just dualists, though. Many philosophers, scientists and laypeople who denounce dualism get trapped in Cartesian ways of thinking. The Cartesian Theatre is a metaphorical picture of how our experiences come about and appear to us. It's the widespread intuition that there's a place where 'consciousness happens', a place where things 'enter our conscious mind'. A thought has crossed the finish line and now it's conscious! All of a sudden, you're aware of it – it's in the Cartesian Theatre!

Cartesian Theatre



Descartes thought that the pineal gland was the place where the soul and body interact. In fact, the pineal gland is a very small pinecone shaped organ in the centre of your brain. Its main function is to produce melatonin: the hormone which regulates sleep.

Now let's be clear: there is no Cartesian Theatre. There is no 'inner observer', no 'inner you', no 'headquarters' within the brain. We have to cleanse our thinking of this idea.

If the Cartesian Theatre isn't fit for purpose, how should we understand consciousness?

I just said that there isn't a headquarters in the brain. That's true; there isn't an inner sanctum or a place where 'it all comes together.' However, we can think of the *whole* brain as the headquarters.

This leads me to the multiple drafts theory. This is the view that the task of analysing content, of discriminating the world, of interpreting our senses – all of the things that we generally suppose happen in consciousness – all of that work is distributed in space and time across the brain. An essential feature of the multiple drafts theory is the following: we only need to make discriminations once. In other words, once the brain has detected a certain thing, it doesn't need to be sent somewhere else: it doesn't have to 'make its way' into the Cartesian Theatre.

Take an example. When I have a visual experience of a banana, the brain recognizes its various features – location (in the fruit bowl), colour (bright yellow), shape (bendy) – and so, as more discriminations are made, our engagement with the banana spreads to other parts of the brain. When I'm probed (say by you asking, 'What are you looking at?'), a draft consisting of these discriminations becomes available to me. There's no Theatre, it's just one part of the brain having more influence than another.⁴

The knowledge argument

Many proponents of dualism and panpsychism evoke Frank Jackson's knowledge argument in their case against materialism. Jackson asks us to imagine Mary, a neuroscientist who learns every physical fact there is to know about colour vision from a black and white room. One day, she's freed, and she sees a red rose for the first time. When Mary sees the rose, she learns something new – *what it's like* to see red – so her prior knowledge (all of the physical information) was incomplete. The conclusion? Materialism must be false.⁵ How would you go about responding to Jackson's argument?

Oceans of ink have been spilt over Mary the colour-challenged scientist! I've had a lot to say about Jackson's argument and it's important to recognize that he's recanted his view. To start, the premises are just preposterous. Take, for example, the idea of knowing 'every physical thing there is to know about colour'. The very idea of anybody knowing *everything* there is to know about anything is absurd. Does Mary know everything there is to know about this teacup? No. That's already taking us into fantasy land!

If we ignored the utter unusability of that premise, it might seem that there could be an argument for qualia of some sort. But let's entertain a different version of the tale. It starts the same way, but when the door opens, we try to trick her . . . instead of showing Mary a red rose, we show her a bright blue banana! She says, 'Hey! That's a blue banana! You're trying to trick me!' Now, my opponents would protest, 'She couldn't say that!'; but prove to me that she couldn't. If she knows *everything* physical about colour, then she knows enough to anticipate her reactions to seeing particular wavelengths reflected in her eyes. If it seems to you that she couldn't have known that, that's not obvious to me. It might seem obvious to you, but that's just a hunch you have; it's a philosophical hunch and it's ill-founded.

So, Mary will know that a banana is yellow?

Of course, she knows everything about colour! Another example should drive the point home. Let's suppose that instead of being deprived of colour, Mary's never ever allowed to feel two pencils being pushed against her skin. She's never had that experience in her whole life, but she's read all about it. Now, the day comes when somebody comes up behind her and sticks two pencils into her shoulder, and she says, 'You've stuck two pencils in my shoulder!' That's not going to be hard for her to say. She hasn't experienced it before, but she knows what it is.⁶

You said a moment ago that 'oceans of ink' have been spilt over this argument. Do you think we'll still be talking about qualia in the distant future?

I don't think so. In time, our everyday talk will change, and we'll stop talking about qualia. We'll still talk about the smell of the coffee, the glorious colours of a sunset and all of the things that we love to talk about, but we'll just know better about what's happening when we do that. We've done this before. We still talk about sunsets, but we don't think, 'Where does the sun go after it falls into the sea?' – we know better than to ask those questions.

Panpsychism

Over the past few years, panpsychism has seen a revival of interest, with prominent philosophers such as David Chalmers, Galen Strawson and Philip Goff leading the charge.⁷ I wonder, are you *at all* sympathetic to the motivations for adopting panpsychism?

No. I've spoken to Philip and I've read his work at some length, but I find panpsychism an ill-motivated view. Moreover, I think it's an ill-conceived view, particularly because it's unclear what would follow from it. I've asked David Chalmers and Philip Goff to compare panpsychism with a view that I'm inventing right now which I call 'pan-nifty-ism'. Everything is nifty! Every electron, every photon, every grain of sand, every tree, every bush: *everything* is nifty.

What follows from pan-nifty-ism? Nothing. What follows from panpsychism? Nothing. Panpsychism doesn't succeed in explaining how 86 billion clueless neurons can contrive to make a human mind that can appreciate the Mona Lisa, and saying, 'Well, each one of those neurons and each one of their little parts has a little bit of psyche in them!' – that goes nowhere. Panpsychism's an empty view. Just say that everything's nifty!

Does this mean that panpsychism's not answering what you call 'the hard question'?⁸ Could you say what that is?

Exactly. The hard question is this: once something 'enters consciousness', what does this cause, enable or modify? What does this type of consciousness *do*? Dualism and panpsychism are absolutely not addressing the hard question. They just say, 'A mystery happens!' The whole point is to postulate a substance that is apparently beyond the reach of science. Well, that's just giving up.

Can the materialist answer the hard question?

The materialist sees the hard question as a problem to be solved, rather than an impregnable mystery. We have all the cards because we've got a lot of theory about mechanisms and how they work. We know about neural tissues and the operations of those tissues, and we're beginning to understand how these enable human beings to perform complex

Made up of nerve cells, neural tissues are the nervous system's central components. Simply put, their role is to send information around the body.

tasks like making subtle discriminations. There's a wealth of data on this, which goes some way in answering the hard question.

I wonder how much of the debate between the non-materialists and materialists comes down to a disagreement about how much we can learn from the first-person experience. For example, Philip Goff says, 'When I experience pain, I fully grasp *what it is to feel pain!*' and you say . . .

'No, you don't!' I say, 'I'm sorry, your confidence on that score is ill-founded'. There are some people – predominantly Philip Goff, David Chalmers and Galen Strawson – who are just convinced to their shoes that they know from the inside what having consciousness is. They won't consider the likelihood that they might be wrong. This is the only topic that anyone would say that about. No one would say, 'Look, simply by having a metabolism, I know things about my metabolism, and that's proof against any science!'

Lots of anti-materialists say that they *do* understand their conscious experiences. Folks like Chalmers, Montague, Strawson and Goff say, 'Yes, we know *what it's like* to feel pain. There's this qualitative experience which can't be explained by physical science, so we've got to rethink our understanding of the universe.'

Yes, to some extent I agree. They know *what it's like* to feel pain and so do I. However, none of us knows *everything* about feeling pain. Most importantly, they don't know that their conscious experience is immaterial. They can't know that.

The silliest claim ever made

Galen Strawson wrote in the *New York Review of Books* that your view constitutes the 'silliest claim ever made'.¹⁰ He writes: 'One of the strangest things the Deniers say is that although it seems that there is conscious experience, there isn't really any conscious experience: the seeming is, in fact, an illusion. The trouble with this is that any such illusion is already

'The Deniers' is the label Galen Strawson gives to advocates of illusionism, namely, Keith Frankish and Daniel Dennett.

and necessarily an actual instance of the thing said to be an illusion . . . It's not possible here to open up a gap between appearance and reality.'¹¹

I'm so grateful to Galen for this passionate and vivid expression of views, that are indeed, very opposed to mine. The reason I'm grateful to him is that I wouldn't have dared to put those words in the mouth of Otto, my fictional critic in *Consciousness Explained*, because people would say that I was creating a strawman; and a living, breathing, table-thumping Strawson is better than a strawman any day!

A 'strawman' is a falsely presented version of a position that makes it appear weaker than it actually is. Strawmen are often used to create the illusion that a position has been defeated.

The thing is, he really says these things; I mean, he *really* says them. You just have to stop and think about the state of mind he's in to award me the honour of defending the 'silliest idea anybody has ever had'.

Now, the prospect that he may have been misinterpreting me seems fairly likely. Indeed, in the very quotation that you just mentioned he misinterprets me. As I have said any number of times: I am not denying that consciousness exists, I'm just saying that you're wrong about its nature! When we introspect, yes, consciousness *seems* to be linked with qualia, but this is an illusion. I say: 'You're wrong about some of the main features of consciousness.' There's nothing self-contradictory about that.

If Galen has some sort of papal infallibility about the nature of consciousness (and sometimes it looks like that *is* what he's saying), then there would be grounds for thinking that the illusion that I claim would be an instance of qualia. But no, it's not. It's not an instance of his phenomenon because he's got a bad theory of consciousness. Consciousness is not the way he thinks it is, and so there's no inconsistency at all.

I'm so glad he wrote that, because if ever I thought I'm beating a dead horse . . . no, no, no . . . there are some people out there – in fact, some very clever and articulate people – who just don't get it, and don't *want* to get it. Galen's afraid that I'll talk people into what he thinks is a morally pernicious position because he thinks it's going to be a dire consequence. Well, it's only going to be a dire consequence if you think that the value of human life depends on having the kind of mind that Strawson thinks we have. I'm sorry, he's just wrong about what consciousness is.

Afterthoughts

With all of its exciting rhetoric and philosophical insight, there's a lot to explore in this interview, but I'd like to focus on the final section – whether or not Dennett's view is 'the silliest claim ever made'. Strawson's argument is that Dennett's view is self-contradictory. He essentially says, 'Dennett thinks that consciousness is an illusion, but *his very thought* that consciousness is an illusion, is itself an instance of consciousness!' It's as if Dennett's saying he doesn't believe in tomatoes, whilst he's biting into a tomato!

In his reply, Dennett explains that he's not denying the existence of consciousness, it's just 'not what you think it is'. A helpful way of understanding this was given by Keith Frankish in the previous chapter. Suppose you came across a street magician who makes a beetle disappear before your eyes. In your ignorance, you think that it's magic. But when you ask her, 'How did you do that?', she tells you it was a trick. There wasn't a beetle there in the first place! It still *seems* as if the beetle was there (in one sense it's real – like consciousness), but now you know more about *how* it got there. Whether or not Strawson and Dennett are talking about the same concept is another matter. We'll explore this further in the next chapter, where Strawson gives his response to Dennett's rebuttal.

Questions to consider

1. Will we always be trapped in Cartesian ways of thinking?
2. How might Michelle Montague respond to Dennett's criticism of autophenomenology?
3. If we released Mary from her black and white room and presented her with a blue banana, would she know that we were trying to trick her?
4. When we feel pain, do we grasp the nature of the experience?
5. Is panpsychism just as empty and trivial as pan-nifty-ism?

Recommended reading

Advanced

Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little, Brown, 1991).

Consciousness Explained is one of the best introductory texts in philosophy of mind. Here you'll find Dennett's most influential ideas wrapped up in a big picture theory of consciousness.

Daniel Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

One of Dennett's best contributions: witty, a little tricky and deeply profound. Starting with bacteria and ending at modern civilization, he explains how the conscious mind developed from the unconscious processes of natural selection.

Intermediate

Daniel Dennett, 'Illusionism as the Obvious Default Theory of Consciousness', in *Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness*, ed. Keith Frankish (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2017), 80–89.

In this article, Dennett endorses Keith Frankish's research project. He explains his main reasons for favouring illusionism and sets out some of the main questions the theory will have to answer.

Daniel Dennett, *Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays on Mind and Psychology* (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

First published in 1978, this is Dennett's second book. It's a collection of seventeen short essays focusing on the nature of consciousness. They don't need to be read chronologically, just go for one that grabs your interest. The final essay – 'Where Am I?' – comes highly recommended.

Beginner

Daniel Dennett and David Papineau, 'Papineau vs Dennett: a philosophical dispute', *The Times Literary Supplement*, August 2017, www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/dennett-papineau-debate.

This is a short correspondence between Dennett and another famous physicalist, David Papineau. The focus is animal consciousness and qualia. It provides a good insight into the tensions between Dennett's view and other brands of physicalism.

Daniel Dennett and Galen Strawson, 'Magic, Illusions, and Zombies: An Exchange', *The New York Review of Books*, April 2018, www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/04/03/magic-illusions-and-zombies-an-exchange.

Shortly after Dennett took part in our interview, his response to Strawson was published in the *New York Review*. This article includes Dennett's reply, along with a rebuttal from Strawson. If you're interested in their clash, this is definitely worth reading.