

‘Magic, Illusions, and Zombies’: An Exchange

Daniel C. Dennett, reply by Galen Strawson

In response to:

“[The Consciousness Deniers](#),” *NYR Daily*, March 13, 2018

To the Editor:

I thank Galen Strawson for his passionate attack on my views, since it provides a large, clear target for my rebuttal. I would never have dared put Strawson’s words in the mouth of Otto (the fictional critic I invented as a sort of ombudsman for the skeptical reader of *Consciousness Explained*) for fear of being scolded for creating a strawman. A full-throated, table-thumping Strawson serves me much better. He clearly believes what he says, thinks it is very important, and is spectacularly wrong in useful ways. His most obvious mistake is his misrepresentation of my main claim:

If [Dennett] is right, no one has ever really suffered, in spite of agonizing diseases, mental illness, murder, rape, famine, slavery, bereavement, torture, and genocide. And no one has ever caused anyone else pain.

I don’t deny the existence of consciousness; *of course*, consciousness exists; it just isn’t what most people think it is, as I have said many times. I do grant that Strawson expresses quite vividly a widespread conviction about *what consciousness is*. Might people—and Strawson, in particular—be wrong about this? That is the issue.

He invokes common sense against which to contrast “the silliest claim ever made” (I’m honored!), but here is some other common sense that pushes back: when you encounter people who claim to have seen a magician saw a lady in half, counsel them to postpone their extravagant hypotheses—backwards time travel, multi-world wormholes, quantum entanglement, “real magic”—until they have exhausted the more mundane possibilities. Unrevolutionary science has discovered good explanations for such heretofore baffling phenomena as reproduction, metabolism, growth, and self-repair, for instance. So while it is possible that we will have to overthrow that science in order to account for consciousness, we should explore the default possibilities first. This is the pragmatic policy of naturalism, nothing more. And since we already have lots of evidence that nature has devised a cornucopia of shortcuts and indirect tricks to help animals cope with the complexities of their environments, we would be wise to check first for the possibility that we have somehow inflated our own sense of the “magic” of our consciousness.

Strawson claims to know already that this is hopeless, and even urges a pre-emptive strike against the attempt. He insists, citing Bertrand Russell as his authority, that “we know something fundamental about the essential nature of conscious experience just in having it.” How strange it would be for us to know something “fundamental” about the “essential nature” of a phenomenon simply by undergoing it! We can know something important, something that cannot be ignored, while still being in the dark about the “essential nature” of a phenomenon. Some cancer sufferers think they know something fundamental about their cancer just because it is theirs; but while they no doubt know something about *how it seems to them*, this is not the kind of knowledge of “something fundamental” to pit against empirical research.

Russell’s claim is not a deliverance of introspection or common sense. It is not something too obvious to need support, however appealing it may at first seem. It is a first shaky step toward a philosophical theory. I offer a rival theory, which actually tackles the question of *how* we are able to have “direct acquaintance” with the *contents* (not the properties) of our experiences. To oversimplify, the beliefs you arrive at “directly”—without effort or noticeable analysis—about your experience of the world neither need nor permit any further process of introspection to enable you to tell yourself, or others, what it is like to be you at the moment. While we can know many things about the *contents* of our conscious experience, we have no privileged insight into how this is possible, and we have no immunity to error on this score. There’s a difficult empirical question of how a person’s brain exploits its currently active information to modulate any

verbal or non-verbal behavior (or emotional state or memory), and this question is not answered, but only hidden from view, by Strawson’s pontification: “When it comes to conscious experience, there’s a rock-bottom sense in which we’re fully acquainted with it just in having it.” Sheer bluster, even if many distinguished philosophers have made similar declarations. Strawson uses another misrepresentation to attempt a *reductio ad absurdum*:

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 and necessarily an actual instance of the thing said to be an illusion.

No, we Deniers do not say this. We say that there isn’t any conscious experience *in the sense that Strawson insists upon*. We say consciousness *seems* (to many who reflect upon the point) to involve being “directly acquainted,” as Strawson puts it, with some fundamental properties (“qualia”), but *this* is an illusion, a philosopher’s illusion. So, unless Strawson has something like papal infallibility, which I doubt, this illusion is not “necessarily” an actual instance of his kind of consciousness.

In the end, Strawson reveals his agenda:

This is the Great Silliness. We must hope that it doesn’t spread outside the academy, or convince some future information technologist or roboticist who has great power over our lives.

Strawson apparently thinks that unless *his view* about consciousness is vindicated, we stand in danger of abandoning our morality, ignoring suffering, depersonalizing people. Christians have had similar worries about the imminent collapse of society if people abandon the concept of an immortal soul. And in the sixteenth century, Philipp Melanchthon urged that some “Christian prince” should suppress Copernicus’s theory that the earth went around the sun, fearing the dire consequences if this truth leaked out. We can handle the truth, Galen. We don’t need your kind of mind to preserve the meaning of our lives.

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Galen Strawson replies:

Philosophers use the word “zombie” as a technical term: “a philosopher’s zombie,” Daniel Dennett writes in *Consciousness Explained* (1991), “is behaviorally indistinguishable from a normal human being, but is not conscious.” The zombie may, for example, be a piece of brilliant machinery with flesh-like covering that looks and acts like a human being, although “there is nothing it is like to be a zombie; it just seems that way to observers.”

Plainly, the zombie is not conscious in the standard, rich, “qualia”-involving sense of “conscious” that I stress and that Dennett rejects. It doesn’t feel pain when its arm is shot off, any more than the Arnold Schwarzenegger character does in the 1984 film *The Terminator*.

“Are zombies possible?” Dennett asks. “They’re not just possible, they’re actual. We’re all zombies.” Here, his view seems plain. In the book, he adds a footnote—“It would be an act of desperate intellectual dishonesty to quote this assertion out of context!”—so I hope that I have given sufficient context. But let me provide more (all the quotations in what follows are from Dennett, from various books and papers).

“The idea that there is something like a ‘phenomenal field’ of ‘phenomenal properties’ *in addition to the*

informational/functional properties accommodated by my theory” of consciousness “is shown to be a multi-faceted illusion, an artifact of bad theorizing,” he wrote in a 1993 essay, “Précis of Consciousness Explained,” in the journal *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Here, Dennett is clear about what he *doesn’t* mean by “consciousness.” We see how he can say, in his reply to me, that “*of course*, consciousness exists.” He can say this because *the zombie is conscious* in his terms: it has all the “informational/functional” properties of a human being; it is behaviorally indistinguishable from a human being.

“Let me confirm [Frank] Jackson’s surmise that I am his behaviorist; I unhesitatingly endorse the claim that ‘necessarily, if two organisms are behaviorally exactly alike, they are psychologically exactly alike,’” he writes in another paper that year in the same journal, “The Message is: There is no Medium.” Once again, Dennett holds that a zombie is as conscious as we are, although “there is nothing it is like to be a zombie.” A zombie isn’t conscious at all, in the ordinary sense of the word, but it’s fully conscious in Dennett’s sense of the word, given its “informational/functional properties.”

The same goes for us, according to Dennett. We’re not conscious at all, in the ordinary sense of the word: “We’re all zombies.” He confirms this view [in a 2013 podcast](#). We find in nature “any number of varieties of stupendous organization and sensitivity and discrimination... The idea that, in addition to all of those, there’s this extra special something—subjectivity—what distinguishes us from the zombie—that’s an illusion.”

Consider standard philosophical examples of “qualia”—intense pain, orgasm, visual experience of Times Square at midnight. In *Consciousness Explained*, Dennett allows that it really *seems* to us that we have such qualia, but insists that it doesn’t follow that we *really* have them. I argued that this is a false move, because to *seem* to have qualia is necessarily already to have qualia, and Dennett moved, in his 2007 paper “Heterophenomenology reconsidered,” published in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, to the view that there aren’t even any real seemings: “There are no *real seemings*... judgments are about the qualia of experiences in the same way novels are about their characters. Rabbit Angstrom [in John Updike’s novels] sure seems like a real person, but he isn’t... If materialism is true, there are no real seemings.”

“When I squint just right,” Dennett writes in his 2013 book *Intuition Pumps*, “it *does* sort of seem that consciousness must be something in addition to all the things it does for us and to us, some kind of special private glow or *here-I-am-ness* that would be absent in any robot. But I’ve learned not to credit the hunch. I think it is a flat-out mistake.”

This is “eliminativism” about consciousness, denial of the existence of consciousness. Dennett is not alone. He’s backed up by a good number of present-day philosophers, including recently Keith Frankish, Jay Garfield, and Mark Siderits, as well as psychologists like Stanislas Dehaene. The fundamental mistake they make is to think that there is anything, either in physics or in any other part of science, or indeed in Buddhism (Garfield and Siderits both study Buddhist philosophy), that gives us any good reason to deny the existence of (real) consciousness.

“Sometimes philosophers clutch an insupportable hypothesis to their bosoms and run headlong over the cliff edge,” Dennett writes in a 1995 essay, “The Unimagined Preposterousness of Zombies: Commentary on Moody, Flanagan, and Polger,” in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. “Then, like cartoon characters, they hang there in midair, until they notice what they have done and gravity takes over.” I agree with Dennett about this, and about much else (including Darwin and religion), but here, his image is incomplete. The trouble with philosophers is that gravity doesn’t take over. They continue to cycle in midair, legs a-blur.

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