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Précis of *Consciousness Explained**

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Consciousness has always been a baffling phenomenon, and some have seen it to be fundamentally mysterious, irretrievably beyond human understanding. I argue, on the contrary, that its mysteries are beginning to dissolve, thanks largely to the onslaught of empirical and conceptual advances in cognitive science. So entrenched, however, are the traditional ways of addressing the philosophical problems, that a frontal assault on them is doomed. One cannot hope to convince philosophers by straightforward arguments to abandon the “obvious” assumptions whose mutual acceptance has defined the debates.

A more indirect approach is called for (“Preview,” pp. 16–18), postponing a direct confrontation with the traditional categories until a new perspective has been created, and the reader familiarized with some of its powers. This is a three-stage operation. In Part I, a survey of phenomena and putative difficulties sets the problem and establishes a method. The goal is to create a materialistic, scientifically supported but still deliberately sketchy, model that can actually explain all the puzzling phenomena. The method for achieving this goal requires a philosophically and scientifically neutral way of describing the data—a phenomenology in its original sense of a pre-theoretical catalogue of phenomena. In Part II, the sketch of the model, the Multiple Drafts Model, is developed and supported, and put through some of its paces. Finally, in Part III, the philosophical implications of the Multiple Drafts Model are examined. Only then do I confront the challenges invoking folk psychological categories, and such philosophical terms as *qualia*, *epiphenomenalism*, *zombie*, and *functionalism*, the staple diet of philosophical debate in recent years.

(This indirect approach does not work for all readers, I have learned. Some find the temporary suspension of allegiance to traditional categories beyond them, or are unwilling to venture it. Those who insist on trying to impose their favorite philosophical distinctions on the book from the outset are almost bound to find the first two parts “exasperatingly elusive, even

* Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1991), pp. xiii, 511.

self-contradictory” (Block, 1993). This can prevent such a reader from ever entertaining seriously the possibility that the arguments in Part III succeed in undercutting the traditional distinctions.)

In Part I, the method of heterophenomenology is presented, motivated, and analyzed. It captures the actual practice and background assumptions of cognitive scientists studying consciousness, providing a framework within which theoretical disagreements regarding the explanation of the data can be expressed, while permitting the data to be acknowledged by all sides.

In Part II, the method is put to the test by considering some initially counterintuitive phenomena involving the timing of “events in consciousness.” The paradoxical flavor of these phenomena is due, I argue, to the widespread but tacit assumption of a certain picture of how consciousness must be related to the brain, which I call the Cartesian Theater. Contemporary theorists have abandoned Descartes’ notoriously problem-ridden dualism, with its miraculous trans-substance interaction at the pineal gland, but they have not discarded enough; they have clung to the Cartesian idea that consciousness of a stimulus (or other event) happens when and only when trains of neural events caused by the event in question get transduced into some central medium (the Cartesian Theater). According to this doctrine, which I call Cartesian materialism, there is a cerebral seat of consciousness “where it all comes together.” Exposing this bad idea is not very hard, and decrying it is fun for all, but finding an alternative vision is an uphill battle against intuitions that many persist in deeming innocent. The analysis and criticism of these intuitions, and a re-investigation of the phenomena, yields some constraints on models which are then elaborated into a sketch of an alternative model (or family of models), the Multiple Drafts Model. The initially curious and unfamiliar features of the model are shown to have plausible evolutionary sources, and a chapter is devoted to how the model can deal with some of the most recalcitrant problems of language production.

What emerges from all this is a cognitive “architecture” of consciousness, summarized in a Thumbnail Sketch:

There is no single, definitive “stream of consciousness,” because there is no central Headquarters, no Cartesian Theater where “it all comes together” for the perusal of a Central Meander. Instead of such a single stream (however wide), there are multiple channels in which specialist circuits try, in parallel pandemoniums, to do their various things, creating Multiple Drafts as they go. Most of these fragmentary drafts of “narrative” play short-lived roles in the modulation of current activity but some get promoted to further functional roles, in swift succession, by the activity of a virtual machine in the brain. The seriality of this machine (its “von Neumannesque” character) is not a “hard-wired” design feature, but rather the upshot of a succession of coalitions of these specialists.

The basic specialists are part of our animal heritage. They were not developed to perform peculiarly human actions, such as reading and writing, but ducking, predator-avoiding, face-recognizing, grasping, throwing, berry-picking, and other essential tasks. They are often oppor-

tunistically enlisted in new roles, for which their native talents more or less suit them. The result is not bedlam only because the trends that are imposed on all this activity are themselves the product of design. Some of this design is innate, and is shared with other animals. But it is augmented, and sometimes even overwhelmed in importance, by microhabits of thought that are developed in the individual, partly idiosyncratic results of self-exploration and partly the pre-designed gifts of culture. Thousands of memes, mostly borne by language, but also by wordless “images” and other data-structures, take up residence in an individual brain, shaping its tendencies and thereby turning it into a mind. (pp. 253–54)

This eclectic model draws heavily on the work of many researchers in cognitive science, and the final chapter of Part II orients the model with respect to that literature, acknowledging sources, adjudicating a few of the controversies, and elaborating some of the important details in preparation for the philosophical work of Part III.

Part III opens with a challenge regarding the phenomena of mental imagery, and addresses, in turn, the philosophical literature on the nature of mental representation, belief and thought, the status of folk psychology, the problematic (indeed incoherent) philosophical concept of zombies, the pathologies of blindsight and unilateral neglect, and the ubiquitous and beguiling concept of “filling in” by the brain. The idea that there is something like a “phenomenal field” of “phenomenal properties” *in addition to* the informational/functional properties accommodated by my theory is shown to be a multi-faceted illusion, an artifact of bad theorizing. Otto, a fictional interlocutor, occasionally interrupts the proceedings in order to express under cover of anonymity the most persistent philosophical objections I encountered in presentations of early drafts of these chapters. (This turns out to have been a valuable expository tactic, I think. Otto has been denounced as a stooge or strawman by some, but others have hailed him as my “philosophical conscience” and expressed their allegiance to his doctrines and even endorsed his expression of them. In fact, everything Otto says was drawn, with scant editorial amendment, from heated discussions with philosophers with impeccable credentials.)

Chapter 12, on qualia, exemplifies the “end run” strategy of the whole book, eschewing the direct confrontation (for which, see Dennett, 1988) for an explanation of why the whole idea of qualia is forlorn to begin with. A substitute is provided: an account of some relevant phenomena—color and our attitudes towards colors—that does the work qualia-theories were supposed to do without ever entangling the theorist in the definitional and methodological problems that beset that literature.

The last two chapters defend answers to the perennial problems about the nature of the self, the problem of other minds (especially the minds of other animals and robots), and the hidden agenda that drives so much theorizing by philosophers of mind: the dimly imagined moral implications of a materialist theory of consciousness.

References

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- Dennett, D., 1988, “Quining Qualia,” in A. Marcel and E. Bisiach, eds., *Consciousness in Contemporary Science*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 42–77.