

Consciousness: belief and hypothesis

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Belief

This is what I believe: to have consciousness, or rather to be conscious, and in spite of being sure of this, it should be considered as a proper belief, since one cannot formulate exactly what is meant by this, leave alone prove that it is so. To me at least this seems utterly impossible right now.

More precisely: I believe that consciousness exists, having some relation with neural and other physical activity in brain and body, but is not completely describable by these. Now it is the case that musical tones, comfortably coded as 0-s and 1-s on a CD, can create a splendid world of say a tango. Although the level of the bits on the disc is different from that of the musical form, nothing mysterious is happening: the binary information can be grouped into measures of the dance. But the difference between the level of firing neurons and screaming hormones on the one hand and that of the experience of a sensual night—or simpler, but sometimes with larger consequences, of the taste of a *petite Madeleine*—seems at least unbridgeable: that of a physical phenomenon and that of an experience. What I believe at this moment is that this difference does not only seem to exist, but is very real, in spite of mechanisms of neural synchronization or feedback through memory and other brain-layers, that sometimes are claimed to provide an explanation for consciousness.

By this I do not want to claim that there is a mysterious force, energy or soul, that is causing consciousness. It may very well be possible that there exists a hitherto unknown physical phenomenon, by which consciousness can be explained, and I really do hope so. But this idea—that the quality of consciousness cannot be described completely by presently known physical phenomena—is a proper belief. That it may be different, showing me wrong, I nevertheless consider to be possible. But again, I do not believe this.

Perhaps consciousness deserves a central place in our model of the world. Indeed, all our knowledge comes from it. Physics could be interpreted as a systematizing of perceived phenomena. That will be a victory for my belief. But then we have the problem why there seems to be such a stable ‘world out there’, sometimes called ‘the hard problem upside-down’.

I also believe that all other humans and also some animals have consciousness. And perhaps also the atoms and elementary particles. But that idea I cannot clearly comprehend. Abstractions I do not fear, but I do not know a satisfactory theory with conscious elementary particles. In spite of my belief that we need to extend physics to grasp consciousness, I would not mind to be wrong, provided the refutation is convincing.

BELIEF

Consciousness can be explained in terms of physics,
but only in some future extended form of this science.

Next to trust in physics, this also expresses that there is a missing link.

Hypothesis

For the mentioned belief a solution may not appear before long, for the following hypothesis hopefully sooner.

In Buddhism it is said that consciousness is a formidable illusion. That would settle the matter: then the present physical model of the world would be more complete than I believe. But in that case we have to accept that consciousness is only a mirage. This does not feel right, but that impression may be caused by some attachment.

Driven to investigate and understand something more, I practised insight meditation, stayed many times at the ‘great monasteries’ for intensive retreats and became ‘accredited’ as *vipassana acharya* (insight teacher).

Insight meditation stands next to concentration meditation. During the concentration practise one focusses on one topic, learning to keep consciousness on it for some longer time, ‘as if one makes a picture of it’. This may lead to temporary experiences of delight, beyond fear and greed. In the practise of insight meditation on the other hand, one observes with equanimity, whatever happens, the phenomena of mind and body passing by, like making a movie. Some amount of concentration is needed in order to keep filming with attention. Through practise the resolution of the film becomes sufficiently fine, and one can observe vicious circles in our thinking and feeling, by which we are conditioned. Insight makes it possible to step out of such circles, to get deconditioned.

Using insight meditation it is even possible to eradicate stubborn disturbances in our consciousness. An important tool for doing this is ‘mindfulness’: observing the phenomena, like emotions, with the right distance. This not in order to suppress them, but in order to come very close, without being sucked in and away by them.

After developing mindfulness to a sufficient degree, one encounters during the first principal phase of the training ‘the fundamental characteristics of existence’. One notices that ordinary consciousness consists of a chaotic process of flashes, following each other one by one, without us being capable of controlling them. This causes a very strong resistance and even disgust: at any price one wants to avoid this dissociation, the mother of all existential fears and the very cause of war. Our usual consciousness is an illusion indeed. But as it is based on flashes of awareness, this just shifts the problem of its origin. A symptomatic way to cover up the chaos consists of creating emotions, thoughts, or other behavior that we usually consider as part of us and to which we are attached, nay addicted. The second important phase of the mindfulness training consists of finding a real cure against this disgust: using mindfulness one develops equanimity, calmness and rapture after which one surrenders to the phenomena, having as effect that the built-in resistance against the fundamental characteristics disappears forever. For the rest one keeps one’s personality.

Next to these empirical phenomena a theoretical notion is needed for the formulation of my hypothesis. Given a collection of ‘actors’, that can act on each other and on external objects, one speaks of the notion of ‘reflection’, in

case each actor possesses a ‘code’, often outside the collection of actors, which is itself not active, but may be decoded yielding the actor in question. This process of decoding is performed by other actors. In this way the population of actors has indirectly an influence on itself. Some examples.

1. Proteins. These act on each other and on other molecules. Their codes consists of DNA, that can be modified, selected and decoded by proteins.

2. Natural language. Statements can be seen as actors. The corresponding code is obtained by quoting. The sentence ‘I am sad’ does not imply anything about my present mood. This sentence I did not utter and hence is inactive!

3. Software. Reflection plays an essential role in the universal computer on which I write these words. For example there is a clear difference between a virus in an email (the passive code) and its execution (as actor) after opening this email.

HYPOTHESIS

- (i) The fundamental characteristics of consciousness are being caused by the underlying operating system: neurons with their flashing action potentials and chemical messengers.
- (ii) The built-in urge to hide the characteristics is a natural defense system, in which endogenous opiates and other ‘pleasant’ chemical modulators, but also ‘unpleasant’ ones for fear and stress, are being used to suppress the visibility of the operating system.
- (iii) The liberating mindfulness consists of the application of some neuronal mechanism of reflection.

Research towards this hypothesis may provide a better understanding of consciousness. Although this concept has not been mentioned in the formulation of the hypothesis, it plays an essential role through mindfulness. Why this is so, I can’t explain at all. But one preliminary thing I dare say: instead of a psychological hold onto the ephemeral phenomena, one reaches a hold onto the unchanging foundation of consciousness. Whatever that may be.

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