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INTRODUCTION

I *Mystery—What Mystery?*

Consciousness is widely regarded as an intractable mystery. As soon as we start thinking about it, we find ourselves pulled in two quite opposite directions, and there can seem no good way of resolving the conflict.

On the one hand, it seems clear that consciousness must be a normal part of the material world. Conscious states clearly affect our bodily movements. But surely anything that so produces material effects must itself be a material state.

On the other hand, it seems absurd to identify conscious states with material states. Conscious states involve awareness, feelings, the subjectivity of experience. How could mere matter on its own account for the miracle of subjective feelings?

In the face of this dilemma, many contemporary thinkers counsel despair. They conclude that we lack the intellectual wherewithal to understand consciousness.

Some suggest that this failing may be temporary. Even if our present science is inadequate, they hope that the concepts of some future theory will show us how to unlock the puzzle of consciousness. Others are more pessimistic, and fear that the human mind is limited in ways that will permanently bar us from understanding the mystery.

For myself, I think that all this gloom is quite misplaced. We don't need any fancy new concepts to understand consciousness. For there isn't anything really mysterious about it in the first place.

The basic puzzle, as I presented it above, was to reconcile the causal efficacy of mental states with their subjectivity. Well, I agree entirely with the thought that, in order for conscious states to be causally efficacious, they must be material states.¹ But I don't see why this should leave us with a puzzle about subjective feelings. Why not just accept that having a subjective feeling is being in a material state? What would you expect it to feel like to be in that material state? Like nothing? Why? *That's* what it is like to be in that material state.

2 *The Intuition of Distinctness*

I recognize, though, that there certainly *seems* to be a mystery here. But I don't think that this is because there is something unfathomable about the thesis that conscious states are material. Rather, it is because something prevents us from ever fully accepting this thesis in the first place, and convinces us that conscious states are *not* material states. And then, of course, everything does seem mysterious.

For, as soon as you suppose that conscious states *are* distinct from material states, then some very puzzling questions become unavoidable. How can these extra conscious states possibly exert any causal influence on the material realm? And why are they there at all? By what mysterious power do our material brains generate these additional conscious feelings?

Note, however, that these puzzles arise only because of the initial dualist separation of mind from brain. They would simply dissolve if we fully accepted that conscious states are one and the same as brain states. For, if we really believed this, then we could simply view conscious causes as operating in the same way as other material causes. Nor would there be any puzzle about brain states 'generating' extra non-material feelings. If feelings are one and the same as brain

¹ As we shall see, the important point here isn't the traditional worry that a non-material mind and a material brain would be qualitatively too *different* to enter into any causal intercourse. Nothing in what I say will rest on this thought. Rather, the real issue is 'the causal completeness of physics'—that is, the thesis that all physical effects already have *physical* causes. This seems to leave no room for non-material mental causes to make a difference to material effects.

states, then brain states don't 'generate' a further realm of feelings (or 'give rise to' them, or 'accompany' them, or 'are correlated with' them). Rather, the brain states *are* the feelings. They are what they are, and couldn't be otherwise.²

Still, as I said, it is very hard for us properly to accept that conscious feelings are nothing but material states. Something stops us embracing such identities. We find it almost impossible to free ourselves from the dualist thought that conscious feelings must be something *additional* to any material goings-on. And then, once more, we are stuck with the intractable philosophical puzzles.

This book is an attempt to understand this dualist compulsion, and free us from its grip. A successful materialism must explain the compelling intuition that the mind is ontologically distinct from the material world. This anti-materialist intuition comes so naturally to us that we are unlikely to become persuaded of materialism simply by *arguments*. We can rehearse the considerations in favour, and show that the counter-arguments are not compelling. But as long as the contrary intuition remains, this all seems like a trick. There must be a flaw in the argument, we feel, because it is *obvious* that conscious states are not material states.

So a successful materialism must identify the source of this contrary intuition. It needs to explain why materialism should seem so obviously false, if it is indeed true.

3 *A Need for Therapy*

Wittgenstein thought that all philosophy should be therapy. In his view, philosophical problems arise because we allow superficial features of our thinking to seduce us into confusions. The appropriate cure, Wittgenstein thought, is to become sensitized to the deeper

² Some readers may be uneasy with my implicit assumption that materialism will equate conscious states specifically with *brain* states. Might not consciousness depend on material matters outside the brain, or even outside the body, as well as within? I find this suggestion strange, and shall continue to assume that only brain states matter to consciousness. But most of the arguments which follow do not depend on this assumption. I shall make some further comments on this issue in Chapters 1 and 7.

structure of our conceptual framework. This philosophical therapy will then free us from muddled thinking.

I reject this conception of philosophy almost entirely. I hold that, on the contrary, nearly all important philosophical problems are occasioned by real tensions in our overall theories of the world, and that their resolution therefore calls for substantial theoretical advances, rather than mere conceptual tidying.

Still, when it comes to the particular topic of consciousness, I think Wittgenstein was right. Here our problems are conceptual rather than theoretical. The difficulty isn't that our overall theories articulate inconsistent claims about consciousness. Rather, we get tangled up before we even start theorizing. We get confused by superficial features of our thinking, in the way Wittgenstein had in mind. This happens because we have a special set of concepts for thinking about conscious states, and the structure of these concepts can easily lead us astray. To resolve our philosophical difficulties, we need first to understand this special conceptual structure.

In line with this diagnosis, I shall not be offering any '*theory of consciousness*' in these pages. There are many such theories on offer nowadays, from both scientists and philosophers, and I shall make some comments on the prospects for such theorizing in Chapter 7. But, in my view, such theorizing is premature. The first step is to unravel our confusions. Then there may be room for '*theories of consciousness*' (though Chapter 7 explains why I have my doubts). The first task, however, is to clear away the conceptual tangles. To make progress with consciousness, we need therapy, not theories.

4 *Ontological Monism, Conceptual Dualism*

The main body of this book, Chapters 2–6, aims to offer just this kind of therapy. I seek to understand the source of our bewilderment about consciousness, and thereby free us from its grip.

The key is to recognize that, even if conscious states *are* material states at the ontological level, we have two different ways of thinking about these states at the conceptual level. As well as thinking of them *as* material states, we can also think of them *as* feelings, by using

special ‘phenomenal concepts’. By carefully analysing the workings of these phenomenal concepts, I am able to explain why it should seem so obvious that conscious states are distinct from material states, even though in reality they are not.

Hence the title of this book—*Thinking about Consciousness*. This isn’t just a book about consciousness. It is more specifically a book about the special ways in which we *think* about consciousness. Such self-conscious reflexivity isn’t always a good strategy for intellectual progress, and indeed is often positively unhelpful. But it is just what we need for the peculiar topic of consciousness.

The general line adopted in this book is no longer new. Plenty of materialist philosophers of consciousness now combine the *ontologically monist* view that conscious states are material states with the *conceptually dualist* doctrine that we have two distinct sets of concepts for thinking about these states, including a special set of phenomenal concepts. (Cf. Peacocke 1989, Loar 1990, Papineau 1993*a*, 1993*b*; Sturgeon 1994, Hill 1997, Hill and McLaughlin 1998, Tye 1999.) Indeed, this conceptual dualism is quickly becoming the orthodoxy among analytic philosophers who defend a materialist view of consciousness.

Still, this book is intended to go beyond this emerging consensus in two ways. First, I offer a detailed account of the working of phenomenal concepts. Most materialist philosophers are interested in phenomenal concepts only because they can use these concepts to block standard anti-materialist arguments, such as Jackson’s knowledge argument, Kripke’s modal argument, and Levine’s argument from ‘the explanatory gap’ (Jackson 1982, 1986, Kripke 1971, 1972, 1980, Levine 1983). Because of this, they tend not to dwell on the nature of these phenomenal concepts, apart perhaps from making some general suggestions about their dependence on imagination, or their similarity to indexical constructions. By contrast, I analyse the workings of these concepts in great detail, explaining exactly how they relate to other mental powers, and in what respects they do and do not resemble indexicals.

Second, I go beyond other contemporary materialists in offering an explicit account of why materialism should be so hard to believe,

if it is true. As I said above, a successful materialism needs to diagnose and cure this intuitive antipathy to materialism, otherwise materialism will seem impossible to believe, even after all the arguments are done. But the intuitive pull of dualism has not received the attention it deserves in the current literature. To the extent that materialist philosophers have addressed it, they have tended to assume that the attraction of dualism simply derives from one or another of the standard anti-materialist arguments, like Jackson's or Kripke's or Levine's.

I argue in what follows that this diagnosis is mistaken. Let me clarify the precise point at issue here. It is not whether the standard anti-materialist arguments succeed in disproving materialism. Along with other materialists, I think they do not, and explain why when I discuss them. The issue, rather, is whether, even given their unsoundness, the standard anti-materialist arguments can nevertheless account for the widespread *conviction* that materialism is false. Perhaps, despite their unsoundness, they are still plausible enough to seduce the unsophisticated into dualism.

I argue that the standard anti-materialist arguments do not do even this much. In order to show this, I point out that each of these arguments appeals to some feature of our thinking about conscious states that is also found in our thinking about other subject areas. Yet we do not find corresponding intuitions of ontological distinctness in these other subject areas. I conclude that the persistent intuition of mind-brain distinctness is due to some further feature of the way we think about conscious states, beyond the features appealed to in the standard anti-materialist arguments.

5 *Understanding the Intuition of Distinctness*

I have a theory about this special feature. I hold that the intuition of distinctness stems from the peculiar way in which phenomenal concepts of conscious states standardly *exemplify* or *simulate* versions of those conscious states themselves. This can sow great confusion when we come to contrast this phenomenal way of thinking about conscious states with other ways of thinking about them, and in

particular with thinking of them as material states. Since the latter, non-phenomenal modes of thought do *not* similarly exemplify or simulate conscious states, we feel that they ‘leave out’ the feelings themselves. And so we conclude that the feelings themselves must be something different from the material states we think about non-phenomenally.

If we stop to think about this line of reasoning, we can see that it is fallacious. In previous writings I have dubbed it the ‘antipathetic fallacy’ (Papineau 1993a, 1993b, 1995). It involves a kind of use-mention fallacy. That material modes of thought don’t *activate* feelings doesn’t mean they can’t *refer* to feelings. So this line of reasoning gives us no real cause to distrust materialism. But, for all that, it is terribly seductive. It is ubiquitous in everyday discussions of consciousness, and the reason, I am convinced, why so many people find materialism so difficult to believe.

Thus consider the standard rhetorical ploy used against materialism. ‘How can technicolour phenomenology arise from soggy grey matter?’ (McGinn 1991). Here we are first invited to activate a version of the experience of colour (think of *what it is like* to see technicolour reds and greens). Then we are invited to think non-phenomenally about the putative material equivalent of colour experience (think about a section of squishy brain tissue). Now, we don’t of course *activate* anything like colour experiences in the latter case, when we think about brains. But that doesn’t mean we aren’t thinking *about* colour experiences when we do so. In general, thinking about something doesn’t require activating some version of it.

The way to free ourselves from the seductive fallacy is to understand the special structure of our phenomenal concepts. We need to recognize the existence of these concepts, and to note in particular how they *simulate* the feelings they refer to. Then we can see why it is so natural to conclude that other, non-phenomenal concepts inevitably ‘leave out’ the conscious feelings. And we can also see that, while there is a sense in which this conclusion is true (the non-phenomenal concepts don’t *use* the feelings), this is not inconsistent with materialism (for the non-phenomenal concepts may still *refer* to the feelings).

6 *The Details of Materialism*

All this, as I said, comes in the main body of the book, in Chapters 2–6. Chapter 1 is devoted to a rather different set of issues. Here I look at the rationale for embracing a materialist view of consciousness in the first place. I don't take materialism to be obvious, or some kind of default position which we should automatically embrace if only we can remove the barriers to its acceptance. On the contrary, I regard it as a rather eccentric position, which stands in need of serious argumentative support. (Certainly it is a minority attitude from a historical point of view. Few philosophers or scientists have been materialists about consciousness until relatively recently, for reasons I shall mention in a moment.)

So materialism stands in need of an argument. However, such an argument is not hard to find. Recall the causal argument alluded to at the beginning of this Introduction. Conscious states clearly affect our bodily movements. But surely anything that so produces a material effect must itself be a material state.

In Chapter 1 I look at this argument in some detail. I lay out its premisses explicitly, and consider how far it is feasible for anti-materialists to deny them.

In some ways I would have preferred to skip this initial chapter. The issues surrounding the causal argument have been explored extensively by recent philosophers, and I do not take myself to have anything especially new to add to this debate. Indeed, at one time I hoped to take the causal argument as read, and start straight off with my analysis of phenomenal concepts.

But it soon became clear to me that this was not really feasible. Anybody writing seriously about mind–brain issues nowadays needs to explain whether they think of materialism in terms of type identity, token identity, realization, or supervenience. They need to explain whether they think of causation in terms of events, facts, or states of affairs. And they need to explain exactly how they understand all these terms, not to mention how they understand the terms which frame the debate in the first place, such as 'material' and 'physical'.

I go through all this in Chapter 1. If you are prepared to take my

line on these matters on trust, I would be more than happy for you to jump straight to Chapter 2. But for those who want to be clear about the precise way I am construing materialism, Chapter 1 is the place to look.

One specific issue that arises in chapter 1 is worth mentioning. A crucial premiss in the causal argument—the ‘completeness’ (or ‘causal closure’) of physics—turns out to be a relatively recent scientific discovery. The evidence in favour of this premiss has accumulated only over the last century or so. Correspondingly, this premiss was widely disbelieved in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, by serious physical scientists as much as others, which is why, if you ask me, materialism was so little believed until recently.

There is of course no reason why this recent provenance of the completeness of physics should present a problem for materialism. A recently discovered truth is still a truth, and we will still do well to believe its consequences. But it is worth focusing on the historical contingency of the completeness of physics, for it does have the virtue of explaining why philosophical materialism is so much a creature of the late twentieth century. Sceptics sometimes suggest that this popularity is essentially a matter of passing fashion. I am able to argue that, on the contrary, the late rise of philosophical materialism is fully explained by the late scientific emergence of the completeness of physics. (Some of the more detailed historical discussion of this issue has been relegated to an Appendix at the end of the book.)

7 *The Plan of the Book*

After the general materialist arguments of Chapter 1, I turn to the analysis of phenomenal concepts. In Chapter 2 I start with Frank Jackson’s knowledge argument. Jackson’s argument is designed as an argument for ontological dualism. I show that this ontological conclusion does not follow, but that Jackson’s line of thought nevertheless provides an effective demonstration of conceptual dualism—that is, of the existence of distinct phenomenal concepts.

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In this chapter I also make some initial comments about the nature of these phenomenal concepts.

Chapter 3 begins with Kripke's modal argument against materialism. In the first instance I simply aim to analyse this argument, and to show that there is a way for the materialist to defuse it. But in the course of this analysis a further feature of phenomenal concepts emerges: if materialism is true, then phenomenal concepts must refer directly, and not by invoking any contingent features of their referents.

In Chapter 4 I build on the points already established to develop a detailed account of phenomenal concepts. I compare phenomenal concepts, which refer to experiences, with perceptual concepts, which standardly refer to observable features of the non-mental world. And I argue that phenomenal concepts paradigmatically draw on exercises of perceptual concepts, in a quotational manner. At the end of this chapter I use this account to cast some light on the ways in which we are immune to error about our own conscious states.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the 'explanatory gap'. I make the following points. Mind-brain identities are indeed inexplicable, but so are many other true identities. By contrast, scientific identities are characteristically open to explanation, in a way that mind-brain identities are not. However, this is simply because scientific and mind-brain identity claims have significantly different structures, and not because there is anything wrong with mind-brain identities. In any case, these matters of relative explanatoriness have little to do with the intuitive feeling that there is a brain-mind gap. This has a different source, which has nothing to do with the fact that mind-brain identities don't explain.

In Chapter 6 I focus on the real source of the intuition of mind-brain distinctness. I first show that the standard accounts of this intuition are inadequate. I then appeal to my analysis of phenomenal concepts to explain the intuition, as arising from the 'antipathetic fallacy', in the way outlined above. That is, I point out that phenomenal concepts activate versions of the feelings they refer to. By contrast, non-phenomenal concepts do not so activate any feelings. And then it is all too easy to slide, via the thought that the non-phenomenal concepts 'leave out' the feelings, to the

fallacious conclusion that non-phenomenal concepts cannot refer to feelings.

In the final chapter I consider the prospects for substantial scientific research into consciousness—that is, research which seeks to identify the material referents of phenomenal concepts on the basis of empirical evidence. Nowadays there is a great deal of enthusiasm for such research, among psychologists, neurologists, and other cognitive scientists, as well as among philosophers. But I argue that such research is limited in essential ways. There are questions about the referents of phenomenal concepts that it is quite unable to answer.

However, I do not take this to show that there are mysteries of consciousness which somehow lie beyond the reach of science. Rather, the fault lies in our phenomenal concepts themselves. They are irredeemably *vague* in certain dimensions, in ways that preclude there being any fact of the matter about whether octopuses feel phenomenal pain, say, or whether a silicon-based humanoid would have any kind of phenomenal consciousness. I realize that this suggestion will seem counter-intuitive. Moreover, it calls into question the motivations for much current ‘consciousness research’. Nevertheless, I think that there is no basis, beyond outmoded metaphysical thinking, for the conviction that facts about phenomenal consciousness must be sharp. And, in so far as the current enthusiasm for ‘consciousness research’ rests on this conviction, it would be no bad thing for it to be dampened.

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