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Experiences as phenomenal structures
Developing a dualistic non-cartesian model of consciousness

SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS

Thesis advisor:
Prof. univ. dr. Rațiu Dan-Eugen

Ph.d. student:
Goje Nicolae

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Contents

Introduction **4**

Chapter 1 Arguments for the reality of consciousness 15

1.1. Logical structure of the arguments *15*

1.2. Ontological implications and the motivations for dualism *27*

1.3. Methodology and the (re)analysis of the arguments *41*

Chapter 2 Constructing the model **55**

2.1. Consciousness as an ontological problem *55*

2.2. Mental content *71*

2.3. Mental architecture and semantic content *87*

Chapter 3 Aesthetic experience **98**

3.1. Structural elements *98*

3.2. Epistemological problems *113*

3.3. Interpretation and sensibility *124*

Chapter 4 The phenomenal dimension and the real **139**

4.1. Phenomenology and dualism *139*

4.2. Sense and significance *152*

4.3. The lived experience and free will *164*

Conclusions **178**

Bibliography **187**

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The thesis investigates the problem of the nature of consciousness, which can be formulated as follows: how come there is something it is like to be in a conscious state or another (Thomas Nagel), since the organisms to which we attribute conscious experiences are composed of non-conscious components, of physical matter. The problem is also called “the hard problem” (David Chalmers). It is an ontological, or metaphysical question.

There are a number of solutions offered by the philosophical literature, such as dualism (the classic Cartesian, or property dualism), materialism (which in a way denies that the problem exists), idealism (with its long history starting at least with Plato), or panpsychism (which, although it has a history going back at least to Leibniz or even Aristotle, is brought back into discussion by philosophers like Galen Strawson). But each of these solutions encounters difficulties either for reasons of inconsistency with the data of experience, with experimental data, with scientific models, or for reasons of epistemological or ontological inelegance.

The paper proposes a new model. It would be a variant of the dualism theses, one that avoids the fantastic/supernatural character of Cartesianism, but which at the same time does not empty consciousness of substantiality, as property dualism does.

To formulate the thesis briefly :1.There are both physical and mental, conscious phenomena in the real world. The two are ontologically distinct and are both substantial, except that the mental phenomena are not physical, and the physical phenomena are not mental. 2. Our own experiences, or experiences in general, are constructed from these mental phenomena that present experiential qualities, or qualia. 3. A singular mental phenomenon is described by its qualitative content and simultaneously by the fact that it is conscious, that is, there is something it is like for the respective mental state to be, that is to have the content that it has. There is something it is like for a mental phenomenon to express the color red, namely the quality of "redness", which already describes a conscious phenomenon. 4. There is no central self or central consciousness (a Cartesian ego), which would be the homunculus fallacy. But the experiential construct presents an integrative, unifying tendency (always incomplete), by virtue of its own laws and dynamics (sometimes called psychophysical laws).

The separation between self, ego (identified by Descartes with consciousness itself) on the one hand and experience on the other is therefore not fundamental. According to this model, the self is considered as a construct among others within experience; and consciousness is the fundamental property of the qualities of experiences (qualia), the what it is like to be of being conscious (at the

risk of a circular definition). Consciousness is sometimes understood as self-awareness, as the capacity of an individual for self-knowledge, but in this model that capacity is only a part of consciousness, experience representing the whole. A conclusion that Descartes also reaches towards the end of the Meditations.

The arguments for this model come mainly from the field of philosophy of mind. The research methodology is analytical, aiming at the logical and epistemological correctness of the arguments.

Chapter 1 examines some of the arguments against physicalist monism. Some of these turn out to be circular (such as the modal argument for the metaphysical possibility of the existence of philosophical zombies). But Frank Jackson's thought experiment "Mary the colorblind neuroscientist" can be interpreted in a coherent way, I argue, to demonstrate the ontological distinction between the physical and the mental. Even if all the information about a physical object could hypothetically be known, it would not be sufficient to describe the conscious phenomenal dimension of the experience of that object. It is necessary to posit a completely new, distinct dimension that contains the phenomenal properties, not just the physical structures (which can possibly be represented in experience as perceptions and to which the representations stand in a certain causal relationship). We are therefore dealing with a form of dualism.

Chapter 2 follows the development of the model. Experience is therefore conceived as an integrative construct formed by conscious mental units (conscious in the sense that they express a phenomenally available content). These units are substantial, have their own ontology, distinct from the physical, but exist in a causal relationship with the neuro-computational substrate of the brain. They manifest themselves only under certain conditions, namely in the context of a nervous system, but disappear with a change in the neuronal causal context – conscious experience is in flux.

Under this ontic formulation of mental phenomena, the model seems to contradict the ontology and the laws of physics. The problem of causality: another type of non-physical causality is needed, from the physical phenomenon to the mental one, otherwise the principle of causal closure of the physical world would be violated. The problem can be overcome by considering that mental phenomena are not considered transcendent, therefore outside of space and time, but only having a different substantiality than the physically material one. Physics itself always postulates other types of matter with new types of properties. It is therefore at least conceptually possible and coherent to postulate a new type of substance, and the causal relationships between it and the known physical world can be defined.

Another challenge comes from the theory of evolution. The theory of materialism seems to cooperate best with the theory of evolution; evolutionary forces are material, genetic and phenotypic. But, as I mentioned, mental phenomena, although ontologically distinct from physical

processes, are causally relative to them, especially to the neuro-biological ones, therefore in accordance with the material forces in the environment and in the organism, at least to those of which the individual is aware. What is transferred from the physical organism to the experience, immaterial in itself, but causally dependent, is a form of information, which is reinterpreted and "transcribed" in the phenomenal environment.

The brain is interpreted by contemporary cognitive science (since the 1950s) as a biological computer, as a mechanism that processes information. But a physical mechanism is not capable of generating experiences in itself. Thus, it can be postulated that mental phenomena occur in response to cerebral phenomena and manifest the information expressed by the latter in a phenomenal, conscious form. The brain performs the physical work of computing information, and the mental domain reacts to the information in the system in the form of experiential qualities. A further parallel is between the strongly connectionist neural architecture and the integrated and unifying character of conscious experience.

Chapter 3 analyzes aesthetic experience from the perspective of the model. Aesthetic experience is a paradigmatic case of complexity that shows the structural and content richness of conscious experiences. Essential for aesthetic experiences is the structural unitary character. We see how experiences are constructed, how particular elements come together to create the synthetic whole. The whole exists not only as a sum of the parts but has a distinct identity, beyond the parts, but dependent on them. The holistic Aristotelian formula can be invoked, the whole is more than the sum of the parts. In classical art this is easily understood as the composition is sensoryally perceptible. In modern, symbolic, or avant-garde art (Duchamp, for example), external cognitive structures intervene as interpretations. What happens is a concatenation or an association between different phenomenological, cognitive, emotional and sensory structures. We can draw a parallel with the idea of two nerve centers becoming connected and interwoven (entagled), as a form of synesthesia, creating a new synthetic experience of the whole. Art often refers us to something else, is about something else, but at the same time keeps us in the image.

In the experience of everyday life, this synthetic, therefore aesthetic, unitary character is found in varying degrees. From simple objects that have their own spatio-temporal unity, therefore their own aesthetic identity, to cognitions that symbolically represent the “essence” or semantic skeleton of the object. It can be said (as a Platonic metaphor) that experience in general participates in the idea of unity in the sense that it belongs to its fundamental dynamics and structure to form such integrative and unifying structures.

Chapter 4 follows the way in which consciousness is situated and in which it relates to the external world. Several phenomenological concepts are analyzed. Intersubjectivity, or the social dimension, cannot be considered fundamental in the light of this model. The model proposes the

ontological separation between the physical and the mental, but it also situates consciousness in the proximity of the organism, so a consequence is the ontological isolation of the individual and between individuals. But this does not mean an epistemological separation. Communication is possible through the physical environment. Although we cannot know if we see the same colors (the inverted spectrum hypothesis), communication is based on the common, public character of the intentional object. Even in the case of social institutions, such as language or money, these always have a physical-symbolic support, such as a paper (contract) and associated behaviors (which are publicly accessible, as behaviorism insisted).

There is no need for an idealistic framework to explain different epistemological and phenomenological structures. A dualistic framework is sufficient. The so-called embodied character of the mind is easily understood by the fact that the brain (and consequently the mind) creates models or maps of the environment and the body (both physical and cultural), based on which it can navigate and act.

A specific application of the model is the analysis of religious phenomenology, or spiritual experiences. It is not necessary to invoke supernatural entities. Experience is construed as a controlled hallucination, in neuroscience models of consciousness, or in other words, it happens inside us. We can interpret religious or spiritual experience as a certain type of aesthetic experience that does not have a specific target object, but that affects and alters the entire field of experience, transforming it into an aesthetic object, often associated with music. This does not mean, however, that these experiences necessarily reveal anything objectively real about the ontology of the physical world, but they say something about the subjective world. Meaning is a product of the mental, subjective world.

Finally, the thesis touches on the issue of free will. The libertarian formulation is favored. The model seems to point to the strong formula of libertarianism, that if causality from the physical to the mental is possible, and if the indeterminism demonstrated by modern physics leaves at least room to not completely close off the physical world causally, then causality from the mental to the physical is at least conceptually possible in principle. Moreover, the possibility of purely mental action would even be necessary for the coherence of the dualist/naturalist model - so that in the evolutionary economy it would guarantee a symbiosis, a complete communication between the physical and experiential dimensions of organisms. But the consequence is that we must broaden the spectrum of the functions of the pure mental. We have already attributed an interpretative role to the mental dimension through the function of translating raw information from the brain into experiences. But this does not necessarily mean intelligence. It could be that natural, determined laws fulfill this role. Human (and animal) intelligence is emergent, not fundamental. The will, the fact of acting consciously, not just reactively, should be related to something that is simultaneously

primordial and has a certain sensitivity to the reasons (hence intelligence) of a higher degree or level of cognitive complexity, sometimes called HOT (higher order thought).

The fundamental thesis of the work is that consciousness is identical to the form, structure and essence of experience at a given moment, it is inseparable from it. Due to the unifying or integrative tendency of experience (which is formed by individual mental phenomena) there also appears the "illusion" of a distinct center, the agent, but in essence it is a continuous phenomenon. Contemporary philosophy of mind, at least in part, does not distinguish between mentality and consciousness (excluding what is called the unconscious mind which can be delegated to neural processes that are not directly associated with conscious phenomenal forms). The question that arises is: why is there such a thing as being in a conscious state, what is it like to see the color red, since science says that the world is physical and in the physical world there are no experiential qualities, no colors, only electromagnetic vibrations. The question is not who or what is that thing that is conscious of the color red. The color red, by being an experiential quality, is already defined as something conscious. We could say that it is something self-conscious, but the formulation would refer to meta-cognition, and that is not what is at stake. The sensible formulation seems to be that the mental phenomenon containing the color red is conscious in itself. If we were to distinguish between experience and consciousness we would have three elements: the physical world, experience, and consciousness. It is epistemologically and ontologically economical to reduce the number of theoretical entities as much as possible. Thus, in the model's view, the singular mental quality, a quale, is already a form of consciousness. The experience of the color red is already conscious in itself, or a form of consciousness, which, moreover, has the potential to be part of more complex conscious experiences. But even in more complex experiences the fundamental nature of consciousness does not change. We could say instead that the degree or quantity of consciousness (Phi as Integrated Information Theory calls it) increases, as does the level of integration, unity or intensity of experiences; but its fundamental nature remains the same. The analogy can be made with physical substance which, being (let us assume it would be) always of the same essence, nevertheless takes infinite forms.

It can be said that mental phenomena have two aspects, the content and the awareness of the content. But these two are intrinsically united: consciousness cannot be aware of nothing, and mental content cannot exist without being observed. An economic conclusion is that the two aspects describe the same phenomenon. The awareness of the whole is simultaneous with the experience of the whole, as well as of the parts. The ego is indeed in some way privileged (probably due to evolutionary pragmatism) but it can be considered just another object (a whole or an image) that tends to be at the center of experience, but is not identical to consciouness, which is the essence of experience. As, for example, various spiritual experiences and testimonies show, this structure of

the ego can collapse, with other experiential structures taking the foreground.

The quasi-holistic model of experience seems to be analogous to neuronal architecture. But property dualism also agrees with this isomorphic structure, arguably more elegantly. But attributing a proper, substantial, ontology to mental phenomena seems the more robust solution, given that, even from a neuroscientific perspective, everything we know is ultimately subjective, experiential. The arguments of the philosophy of mind establish that some form of dualism is probably necessary. The non-spatial and atemporal soul of the scholastics does not seem to be able to purify the model of consciousness of logical anomalies. But, as a vestigial concept, it contains in itself the aspects closest to the contemporary science of the mind that we have discussed.

On the other side of the barricade we encounter the strong resistance of materialism associated with scientism. But, as with any dogma, we can only point out what experience, experiments and arguments show, as well as the advice to keep our consciousness open.

In conclusion, I repeat only the essence of the thesis, namely that, from a phenomenological perspective, experience presents itself as a structure populated by qualities of consciousness, among which is the sensation of being a particular person. What is essential, or even miraculous we could say, is why the quality of being something exists in the first place. From an ontological perspective, the model proposes that these mental phenomena are related to the fundamental laws of the universe. Just as the universe is capable of creating electrons and photons, so too is it capable, under certain conditions (which science will explore exponentially in more detail, but probably never completely) of creating the color red, the scent of roses, the perfect fifth, the concept of a circle, and the idea of logic and science in the minds of living organisms that have evolved within it.

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