

What is like to be a physicalist? *Peter B Lloyd*

The celebrated philosopher Thomas Nagel branded the motto ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ in his eponymous paper (Nagel 1974). This locution has become a *locus classicus* in consciousness studies. Whenever people want to focus attention on what David Chalmers (1996) called the Hard Problem of consciousness, they will ask questions along the lines of, ‘Why is there something *it is like to be* a bat, or a brain, or a mole?’

The Hard Problem is a new label for the old Cartesian mind-body problem (Descartes 1641): what exactly is the relationship between the conscious mind and the palpable brain? Chalmers differentiated the Soft Problem, that is the problem tackled by neuroscience and cognitive science—namely, how the brain performs such tasks as recognition and recollection, or hitting a tennis ball in flight—from the Hard Problem, that is, the philosophical riddle that is still sitting in a corner of our minds, grinning at us, after we have explained the brain in its entirety: why is there any conscious, phenomenal content associated with working brain tissue—or, in Nagel’s wording, why is there something it is like to be a brain?

How do you answer such a queer question about a bat, or any other being—other than oneself? I suppose you have to start from your own mind, and try to imagine how your experience would have to change to match the experience of another sentient being. For example, we humans have two ears and have a rough idea of where a sound is coming from. Close your eyes and try to navigate your way across the living room: here is the ticking of the clock, over there is the snuffling of the dog as he sleeps and dreams, and in the distance the hum of the fridge in the kitchen. Moreover, with time and training you can learn pretty good echo-location by making clicking noises with your mouth and listening for the echoes from the environment. This skill sometimes arises spontaneously in blind kids, but can be acquired later in life. It is the subject of continuing research to understand the cognitive techniques involved (e.g. Thaler et al. 2018). This human echo-location is not nearly as high-performance as a bat’s, but it enables us to form a plausible guess as to what it is like to be a bat.

I don’t think there is a name for knowing what it is like to be another sentient being, so I will call it ‘interphenomenology’ by analogy with ‘intersubjectivity’. The

example considered above is cognitive interphenomenology: what it’s like to have the cognition of a bat.

What I want to do in this article is to look at conceptual interphenomenology: What is it like to have ideas and propositional beliefs radically different from one’s own? Of particular philosophical interest is the question of what it is like to have contradictory beliefs. More narrowly still, I want to zero in on this one: What is it like to be someone who believes she does not have a conscious mind? Which, I shall argue, is equivalent to the question, What is it like to be a physicalist?

Doublethink

George Orwell, in his political novel *Ninety Eighty-Four* (1949) described a totalitarian political system that deployed the specific techniques of newspeak and doublethink to control citizens’ minds as well as the more prosaic tools of surveillance, imprisonment, and torture. Although it is often assumed that Orwell was addressing the dangers of the Soviet Union, his ideas apply to any totalitarian system, and he was equally worried about the future of an increasingly bureaucratic England. Orwell premised his dystopia on a powerful central authority, but in the ‘post-truth’ era of the internet, social media is well able to foster a culture of disinformation and the uncritical acceptance of lies and rumours, as well as doublethink, without the need for a central power.

Orwell’s character, Winston, characterized doublethink thus:

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself—that was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word—doublethink—involved the use of doublethink.

What is it like to doublethink? Is it an error of omission or commission? My own anecdotal experience of

occasions when I have caught myself doublethinking suggest to me that it is a failure to compare two propositions that have been held in different contexts, or at least at different times. We may *imagine* that all our propositional beliefs are present to us at the same time, but that is not how the mind actually works. It requires a deliberate effort to retrieve beliefs from the memory in order to compare and contrast them. Until that mental action is taken, the beliefs can quite happily sit in the mind with, as it were, latent contradiction.

The Trump era in the USA provides a cornucopia of examples of the political and psychological dysfunctions that were described by Orwell, including doublethink. For example, in the context of jingoistically disrespecting other nations, a Trumpist would believe that Covid-19 was a terrible affliction deliberately inflicted on the USA by China; while in the context of disrespecting the Democrats, a Trumpist would believe that Covid-19 was just the sniffles. Only when prompted, by, say, a journalist, would the Trumpist have to compare and contrast the two beliefs. At that point, blanket denial kicks in to block the question, as in Trump's standard rebuff, "That's a nasty question. You're fake news! Next question!"

In religious contexts, where rationality is openly disavowed, doublethink can come out of the closet and even be worn as a badge of honour. Within Roman Catholicism, for instance, the faithful believe that the content of the communion cup is wine and that it is at the same time the blood of Jesus of Nazareth. This act of doublethinking is not only accepted, but regarded as virtuous, and the contradiction termed a Mystery. In most areas of life, however, we are obliged to think in a grown-up way, where doublethink is an embarrassment whenever it comes to light.

Holding contradictory beliefs in different contexts is, therefore, easily imaginable and, in some political and religious climates, commonplace.

Optical illusions

What is more puzzling is holding a belief that is contradicted by one's experience at the same moment. Optical illusions are a simple example. There are many straightforward examples of illusions in which straight lines seem curved, or parallel lines seem to converge, or grey patches appear in white areas, or colours seem different when they are the same. Just Google 'optical illusions' and you will see them aplenty. The familiarity of optical illusions seems to eclipse their strangeness, and we don't even ask what it's like to have an optical illusion. But ...

what *is* it like to see parallel lines and yet believe you are seeing convergent lines? I think this phenomenon still falls into the same philosophical category as the holding of contradictory opinions. For, the illusion relies on the impossibility of comparing side-by-side distant parts of the visual field. The notion of parallel lines is that they are equidistant, but to tell whether the distance between the lines is the same at each end, you could have to copy and paste one end to the other, whereupon the illusion is destroyed. This is rather like contradictory beliefs forming a 'short circuit' when they are juxtaposed—at which point either the contradiction is acknowledged, or a defence mechanism kicks in (Trump's "That's a nasty question").

Anton's syndrome: blindness denial

Anton's syndrome is a neurological disorder in which part or all of the visual field is lost but the subject maintains that it is still there, apparently genuinely believing it. What is it like to have a big hole in your visual field, but not believe it is there? The precise phenomenology of Anton's syndrome is still an active area of research (e.g. Allen-Hermanson 2015), nevertheless it appears that the reported visual content is not hallucinatory but results from confabulation, a spontaneous invention of false beliefs.

This takes us deeper than merely holding contradictory opinions. Doing the latter is possible, I have suggested, because comparing two propositions requires a specific action of retrieving them and considering them in comparison. In the confabulation that occurs in Anton's disorder, however, the mistaken belief overrides the normal, privileged introspection of the mind. For example: if there is a red patch in my visual field then I can, by introspection, form the correct belief that there is such a red patch, and report that belief in words. Confabulation disrupts this process of introspection: it decouples belief from experience.

Confabulation also occurs in split-brain patients (e.g. Gazzaniga 2015) where the left hemisphere does not know what the right is thinking, and vice versa. When the left (verbally competent) hemisphere is asked about some action taken by the right hemisphere, it will effortlessly make up a story about the reason for the action. Example: a photograph of a sunflower is projected in the right hemifield (and hence the left visual cortex), and a sexually arousing picture is projected into the other hemifield (and hence the right visual cortex). The subject blushes. When asked,

the left hemisphere (which knows only of the flower picture) confabulates that the room must be hot.

The evolutionary benefits of confabulation are obvious: the brain runs on incomplete information about the environment but must act quickly to catch prey and evade predators. A brain that fills in the gaps, usually correctly, is a life-saver.

Denial of a perceptual deficiency (as in Anton's) is clearly pathological. The reverse is not usually regarded as a pathology but an eccentricity. To have normal functioning phenomenal content in the visual field of your conscious mind, but to assert that you have no phenomenal content is weird but does not stop you doing anything in day-to-day life.

Dennett's syndrome: consciousness denial

Galen Strawson, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas, has been strident in his attacks on philosophers and neuroscientists who deny the real existence of consciousness (e.g. Strawson 2006). In a blistering article in the *New York Review of Books*, he let rip thus:

What is the silliest claim ever made? The competition is fierce, but I think the answer is easy. Some people have denied the existence of consciousness: conscious experience, the subjective character of experience, the "what-it-is-like" of experience. Next to this denial—I'll call it "the Denial"—every known religious belief is only a little less sensible than the belief that grass is green.

The Denial began in the twentieth century and continues today in a few pockets of philosophy and psychology and, now, information technology. It had two main causes: the rise of the behaviourist approach in psychology, and the naturalistic approach in philosophy. These were good things in their way, but they spiralled out of control and gave birth to the Great Silliness.

[...]

Perhaps it's not surprising that most Deniers deny that they're Deniers. "Of course, we agree that consciousness or experience exists," they say—but when they say this they mean something that specifically excludes qualia. (Strawson 2018)

Daniel Dennett is the arch-denier of consciousness. Of course, he denies that he denies consciousness, as he does in his reply to Strawson. His denial of denial, however, rests on the re-definition of the term 'consciousness' to be something other than what everybody else means by 'consciousness', as in this passage:

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.

[...]

We [i.e. Deniers] 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. (Dennett 2018).

It is hard to imagine a more explicit articulation of Dennett's denialism: he is denying the existence of consciousness in the normally understood sense of the term, while asserting the existence of something that he calls 'consciousness' but is different from what 'most people' mean by the term.

Although Strawson has done a sterling job of arguing against consciousness deniers, he does not appear to have invested much effort into understanding them. What is it like to be a consciousness denier? What is it like to have the normal sensorium of phenomenal contents but to believe that those contents do not exist? To experience smells, colours, pains, angers, and yet to believe and assert that none of those experiences actually exist?

Confabulation as a model of consciousness denial

Some, such as Chalmers (1996) have suggested that Dennett is a zombie (in the technical philosophical sense), but I am sure that this is meant purely in jest. I see no serious reason to doubt that Dennett has essentially the same kind of phenomenal contents that you and I have.

I would like to draw on the analogy of Anton's disorder, in which confabulation fills the mind with beliefs based on expectation rather than on introspection.

Dennett seems to have confabulated the absence of his entire sensory field. Why? How? Why he has done this is easier to explain than how. Dennett is driven by the ideology of the physical sciences, which permits only third-person observations as legitimate empirical data. This ideology has deep roots in science's battle against revealed religion, superstition, scholasticism, and quackery. It is an internalized creed that keeps the scientific community on the straight and narrow, and allows scientific research papers published in any nation on Earth to be understood and assessed in every other culture. The adoption of the scientific method and the supporting culture of self-policed rigour is one of the towering achievements of modern civilization. But, when it comes to consciousness, Dennett and other deniers have deformed the scientific method into 'scient-

ism, a kind of cargo-cult imitation of *bona fide* science. Science admits all objective empirical data, whether they be third-person or first-person. It is only Dennett's scientism that sees fit to wipe out the vast swathe of empirical data that are given as first-person observations. This is not science, but its diametric opposite. To exclude a corpus of explananda because they do not fit an existing theory is anti-scientific and will not get us anywhere. Nevertheless, because Dennett's scientism privileges third-person data and damns first-person data, he is obliged to deny the existence of all phenomenal contents, and to confabulate the non-existence of his very own phenomenal contents.

But how? With phenomenal contents pervading every moment of his waking life, how does Dennett confabulate their absence? I believe the clue lies in his assertion (repeated throughout his publications and public performances) that neuroscience will someday explain away this illusion of phenomenal consciousness.

... 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. (Dennett 2018)

This is often referred to as 'promissory physicalism'. It is the faith that physical science will some day provide a reductive explanation of consciousness, by some means that is at present utterly inconceivable. No physicalist has even the faintest idea of how, even in principle, there could ever be a reductive physical explanation of consciousness. The only two offerings made in half a century of research are: redefinition, that is redefine the term 'consciousness' to mean something other than consciousness, such as 'integrated information' (Tononi 2004) or 'quantum collapse' (Penrose) and then declare the problem solved; or magical emergentism, that is to state *ex cathedra* that consciousness emerges from the complex electrochemical behaviour of brain tissue.

My suggestion is that Dennett is employing 'promissory confabulation' to pretend that his phenomenal contents are not really there. He sees his visual qualia, just as we see ours, but he has an emotional need for them not to exist, because of his scientific creed of recognising only third-person observations. So, he promises himself that, somewhere in the uncharted realm of future neuroscience there will come a theory that will show that he is not really experiencing these phenomenal contents at all.

Denial of this kind is a common defence mechanism against traumatic experiences, first noted by Freud in hysterical blindness.

So there is, after all, a similarity with the other forms of doublethink that we discussed above. Dennett is able to hold his denial of consciousness because it rests on a promised theory of neuroscience that not only lies in the future, but has its foundations and basic principles in unknown future developments. A theory that exists entirely in a glimmer in Dennett's eye is unassailable. No scientific criticism can touch the future reductive theory of consciousness because nobody has any idea what it is. So, Dennett can feel safe in his denial of consciousness, as it is a promissory confabulation premised on a theory that will always be in the future. This theory can therefore never be compared with empirical data, and is hence unfalsifiable.

Physicalism entails consciousness denial

As I indicated in the title, my target in this article is: What is it like to be a physicalist? But, so far, we have considered only what it is like to a consciousness denier. Academic philosophers are fond of telling me physicalism (the doctrine that reality is ultimately entirely physical) does not entail eliminativism (the doctrine that denies the existence of consciousness). The academic party-line is that there are both eliminative and non-eliminative physicalisms. The grounds for this seem to be no more substantive than the denial by some physicalists that they are consciousness deniers. We debunked Dennett's denial denial above, but we can easily show that all physicalisms are eliminative, as follows.

The entire discourse of physics is expressed in terms that are defined analytically, ultimately in terms of undefined fundamentals. For example, bodies are defined in terms of atoms, which are defined in terms of protons, neutrons, and electrons, which are particles of matter, which is an undefined primitive. The undefined primitives are represented numerically in composite entities: thus a particle might have a certain quantity of mass and charge, but what mass and charge 'really are' is not defined. Of course, a particle that we thought was fundamental may be found to comprise novel entities, for example protons and neutrons, once thought fundamental, were found to comprise quarks, but the general logical structure remains the same, insofar as the mass, charge, spin, strangeness, colour, and charm of a quark are equally undefined fundamentals.

The entire discourse of the phenomenal contents of

consciousness minds is expressed ultimately in terms whose **meaning is given by private ostensive definition**. For example, the phenomenal quality of Post Office Red is defined by perceiving that colour and deciding or agreeing that this will be referred to as 'Post Office Red'. This term cannot be understood without that experience. Knowing the spectral distribution of the corresponding light does not tell you what you will observe when you see Post Office Red.

Therefore, the terms of the two discourses, the physical and phenomenal, are disjoint. But all the propositions that can be entailed by any set of physical propositions will also be expressed entirely in physical terms, not phenomenal terms. Therefore, no phenomenal proposition can be entailed by any set of physical propositions. Therefore, no phenomenal facts are grounded in physical facts. Therefore, phenomenal facts are non-physical. Hence consciousness is nonphysical. Hence physicalism is necessarily eliminative.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what is it like to be a physicalist? It is to assert that the physical world exhausts the whole of reality, and to indulge in promissory confabulation to deny one's very own phenomenal contents for the sake a supposed future reductive theory of consciousness, for which there is no evidence, only faith.

Postscript: is this *ad hominem*?

I may be accused of writing an *ad hominem* attack on Dennett and his fellow-travellers, by using psychopathology as a model for his philosophical position, instead of arguing against his arguments. I dispute this. I have written a detailed defence of consciousness as a fundamental part of reality elsewhere in the peer-reviewed literature (e.g. Lloyd 2006, 2020) as well as the grey literature (Lloyd 1999, 2019). There are many other defences of consciousness in the literature, from Chalmers (1996) onwards. I did not feel it necessary to repeat those arguments here.

Dennett is an accomplished scientist of unquestioned standing in his field of cognitive science. He obtained his PhD in philosophy in the University of Oxford in 1965, taught in the University of California, Irvine, for six years, and has held professorial positions in Tufts University for several decades. He has honorary degrees from six universities, and has published more than five hundred articles and papers and numerous books.

When a scientist of Dennett's stature commits the

cardinal scientific sin of choosing to disregard a large body of data because they do not fit his theory, then we are obliged to ask why. It is absurd to suggest that Dennett does not have normal conscious experiences, and offensive and unfounded to suggest he is fraudulently denying his experiences. I have suggested in this article a notion of 'promissory confabulation' as an explanatory hypothesis for Dennett's denial of his own consciousness. I believe the onus is on critics of this article to offer an alternative explanation of Dennett's extraordinary philosophical position.

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