

A hundred years of consciousness: “a long training in absurdity”*

Cien años de la conciencia:
“una larga formación en el absurdo”

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Abstract. *There occurred in the twentieth century the most remarkable episode in the history of human thought. A number of thinkers denied the existence of something we know with certainty to exist: consciousness, conscious experience. Others held back from the Denial, as we may call it, but claimed that it might be true—a claim no less remarkable than the Denial. This paper documents some aspects of this episode, with particular reference to two things. First, the development of two views which are forms of the Denial—philosophical behaviourism, and functionalism considered as a doctrine in the philosophy of mind—from a view that does not in any way involve the Denial: psychological methodological behaviourism. Second, the rise of a way of understanding naturalism—materialist or physicalist naturalism—that wrongly takes naturalism to entail the Denial.*

Key words: *consciousness, behaviourism, naturalism, materialism, physicalism, eliminativism, illusionism*

Resumen. *Uno de los episodios más notables en la historia del pensamiento humano ocurrió en el siglo XX. Varios pensadores negaron la existencia de algo que sabemos con certeza que existe: la conciencia o la experiencia consciente. Otros, aunque se contuvieron de llegar al punto de la Negación—como podemos llamarlo—, afirmaron que podría ser cierta—una tesis no menos notable que la Negación. Este texto documenta algunos aspectos de este episodio, con particular referencia a dos cosas. En primer lugar, el desarrollo de dos puntos de vista que son formas de la Negación—el conductismo filosófico y el funcionalismo en la filosofía de la mente—a partir de una perspectiva que no implica de ninguna manera la Negación: el conductismo psicológico metodológico. En segundo lugar, el surgimiento de una forma de entender el naturalismo—el naturalismo materialista o fisicalista—que interpreta erróneamente que el naturalismo implica la Negación.*

Palabras clave: *conciencia, conductismo, materialismo, fisicalismo, eliminativismo, ilusionismo*

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1. The Denial

There occurred in the twentieth century the most remarkable episode in the whole history of ideas—the whole history of human thought. A number of thinkers denied the existence of something we know with certainty to exist. They denied the existence of consciousness, conscious experience, the subjective qualitative character of experience, the “phenomenal” (or “phenomenological”) “what-it-is-like” of experience. Others held back from the *Denial*, as I’ll call it, but claimed that it might be true—a claim in no way less remarkable than the Denial.

How did this happen? I think the Denial had two main causes. The first was the rise of the behaviourist approach in psychology. The second was the spread of a wholly naturalistic approach to reality. Both were good things in their way. But the spread of the naturalistic approach was coupled to a mistake about what it is to be a materialist, and it spiraled out of control, along with the behaviouristic approach in psychology. Together they gave birth to the Denial: the Great Silliness.

The Denial also had, and still has, a third, deeper, darker root—something much larger and achingly familiar: the crookedness of the “crooked timber of humanity” (Kant, 1784, p. 23, cited by Berlin 1933).¹ What the Denial shows, I fear, is that it’s crookeder than one might ever have imagined.

I will talk first about the two main causes (§§2-5). Then I will say something rather gloomy about the crookedness—the third deep cause (§6). First of all, though, I need to say something about the thing that is being denied—consciousness, conscious experience, the what-it-is-like of experience, *experience* for short. What is it?

The answer is easy. Anyone who has ever seen or heard or smelt or felt anything knows what it is—anyone who has ever been in pain or hungry or satiated or hot or cold or remorseful, amazed, dismayed, uncertain, or sleepy, anyone who has suddenly remembered a missed appointment. To have such conscious experience is to know—to be directly acquainted with—its intrinsic qualitative character as experience, its experiential “what-it-is-like”, simply in having it; and whatever else

¹ When I cite a work I give the date of first publication or sometimes the date of composition, while the page reference is to the edition listed in the bibliography. In the case of quotations from languages other than English I give a reference to a standard translation but do not always use that translation.

there is to know about it.² Many have pointed out that the only way to know the intrinsic “phenomenal” character of a specific kind of experience is to experience it. Locke noted that

if a child were kept in a place, where he never saw any other but black and white, till he were a man, he would have no more ideas of scarlet or green, than he that from his childhood never tasted an oyster, or a pineapple, has of those particular relishes (Locke, 1689-1700, §2.1.6).

One way to express the Denial is to say that it’s the denial that anyone has ever really had any of the experiences just mentioned. So 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 the Deniers say this they mean something quite different by “consciousness” or “experience”. They “looking-glass” or “reversify” these words—where to looking-glass or reversify a word is to use it in such a way that, whatever one means by it, it excludes what it actually means.

Who are these Deniers? I have in mind—at least—all who fully subscribe to something called “philosophical behaviourism”, all who fully subscribe to something called “functionalism” in the philosophy of mind. Few have been fully explicit in their denial, but among those who have been explicit, or very nearly, we find Brian Farrell (1950), Paul Feyerabend (1963a, 1963b), Richard Rorty (1965, but he steps back in 1979), Daniel Dennett (1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1995, 2001, 2013a, 2013b), Alex Rosenberg (2011), Keith Frankish (2016), and Jay Garfield (2016). Paul Churchland in 1979 “confesses a strong inclination towards” the Denial, and calls it “very much a live option” (Churchland, 1979, p. 116).³

One of the strangest things the Deniers say is that although it genuinely and undeniably *seems* that there is experience, there isn’t *really* any experience. The seeming is in fact a complete illusion. The trouble with this is well known. The trouble is that any such seeming or illusion is, necessarily, a real occurrence, and is already an instance of the very thing that is being said to be an illusion. Say you’re hypnotized to feel pain. Someone may say that you’re not really in pain, that the pain is illusory, because you haven’t really suffered any bodily damage. The reply is immediate: truly to seem to feel pain just is to be in pain. In this case it’s

2 This is the only thing I’m going to mean by “consciousness”, “conscious experience” and “experience” used as a synonym of “consciousness”.

3 Some have proposed Paul Souriau as an earlier Denier (Souriau, 1886), but his target is Cartesian self-transparency of mind, not experience as defined here. Nor does William James’s 1904 paper “Does Consciousness Exist?” deny the existence of experience; rather the contrary.

not possible to open up the gap between appearance and reality, the gap between what *seems* and what *is*. If you're doubled up on the ground because you've been hypnotized to believe that you've been shot in the stomach, or that your children have been murdered, we have a moral reason to end the hypnosis, because the experience is real and awful.

I said earlier that it's easy to say what consciousness or experience is. But some philosophers not only deny the existence of consciousness. They also characteristically claim not to know what is being supposed to exist. Ned Block dealt with this well in 1978, when he took over the reply that Louis Armstrong (or perhaps Fats Waller) is said to have given to those who asked him what jazz was: "if you gotta ask, you ain't never goin' to know" (Block, 1978).

Another response is almost as good, although it's condemned by some Wittgensteinians. If someone asks what conscious experience is, you say "Look, you know what is from your own case" (If you want, you can add "Here's an example", and give them a sharp kick). When it comes to experience, there's a rock-bottom sense in we're directly and fully acquainted with it just in having it. For the having is the knowing.

So when people say that consciousness is a mystery, as so many do today, they're wrong, because we know what it is. In fact we know *exactly* what it is. It's the most familiar thing there is.

This doesn't mean that we can easily convey its character in words. We can't. We can't put the experience of red into words (look up the word "red" in a dictionary). Conscious experience is in this straightforward sense "ineffable". This is something that every schoolchild realizes.⁴

Nor does the familiarity of experience mean that we know all there is to know about what is going on inside us when an experience occurs. Experiences considered as a whole are (I take it) complicated neural processes, and those aspects of their being that make neurological descriptions true of them don't show up in our lived experience at all.

What people almost always mean, when they say that consciousness is a mystery, is that it's mysterious how consciousness can be simply a matter of

4 Ineffable: "that cannot be expressed or described in language" (*Oxford English Dictionary*)—fully or directly expressed or described.

physical goings-on in the brain. But here they make a very large mistake, a “Very Large Mistake”, in Winnie-The-Pooh’s terminology—the mistake of thinking we know enough about what physical stuff is to have good reason to think that physical goings-on in the brain can’t be conscious goings-on. A good number of philosophers have based their careers on this mistake, and they can’t now turn back, but the truth is that the fundamental stuff-nature of physical being is not known—except insofar as it is consciousness. If you doubt this, ask some thoughtful physicists. I will say more about this later.

So much for the definition of consciousness—experience with a certain intrinsic qualitative character that is (as philosophers say) private to the experiencer. What does “private” mean in this context? The felt qualitative character of experience is private in the entirely straightforward sense that it is directly known only to the creature that has it when it has it. Suppose that I can see that you’re in great pain right now; I can’t know exactly what it’s like for you. Suppose I can see the happiness shining in your face; again I can’t know exactly what it’s like for you. Conscious experience is in that simple sense an essentially *subjective* phenomenon. Its precise qualitative character is not available for general public inspection. But it’s no less real for that. It’s a straightforward objective fact that there is subjective experience. It is, in other words, a fact about how the world is that obtains independently of anyone’s theory about how the world is.⁵

Everyone knows this. Why bother to say it? Because a couple of hundred philosophers deny it, along with a few psychologists, neuroscientists, and information technology and artificial intelligence specialists.

2. Behaviourism

Now for some history of ideas, the two main causes of the Denial: behaviourism on the one hand, and naturalism or “materialism” or “physicalism” on the other. I’ll use the words “materialism” and “physicalism” interchangeably, following Lewis (1994), and putting aside the fact that we no longer suppose that everything physical is material—matter. I’ll use “materialism” in preference to “physicalism” because it’s the word that is standardly used in previous centuries and for much

5 In the last four paragraphs I’ve attributed four properties to experiential phenomena or “qualia” (see footnote 21 below): they’re *ineffable*, *private*, *subjective*, and have a certain *intrinsic* character (a character that we know in experiencing them). This by way of a reply to Dennett (1988).

of the twentieth century. I'll take materialism (or physicalism) to be the view that everything that concretely exists is wholly physical. Full stop. It doesn't carry any implication of mechanism, and it certainly doesn't involve the provably false view (see §5 below) that the nature or essence of all concrete reality can in principle be fully captured in the terms of physics.⁶

Behaviourism took off a hundred years ago as a research programme in experimental psychology initiated for strictly methodological reasons by psychologists who fully acknowledged the reality of experience, and who knew it to be susceptible of extraordinarily penetrating and subtle description of a sort that had been practised by many of their predecessors. Their objection to it wasn't that it didn't exist, but that they couldn't do proper science with it. The data provided by introspection were irredeemably imprecise. In order to be a proper science, psychology had to stick to publicly observable behavioural phenomena that are precisely measurable and quantifiable.

The foundational text is generally agreed to be John Watson's paper "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views it", published in 1913. But Henry Maudsley (a materialist who endorsed a mind-brain identity theory) raised essentially the same objections to the use of introspection in 1867 (Maudsley, 1867, p. 10), as did Auguste Comte, thirty years earlier (1830-1842). And in 1911, two years before Watson's paper, the philosopher Edwin Singer wrote that "consciousness is not something inferred from behavior, it is behavior" —although he quickly qualified this remark.⁷

Singer was discussing the "automatic sweetheart" imagined by William James in 1908, a simulacrum of a woman—"a soulless body (...) absolutely indistinguishable from a spiritually animated maiden" (1908, p. 5). The "automatic sweetheart" is an example of what philosophers today call a "zombie", a creature that "is behaviorally indistinguishable from a normal human being, but is not conscious" (Dennett, 1991, p. 405; I believe that the philosophical use of the term "zombie" was introduced by Kirk, 1974).

6 I call this view "physics-alism"; see Strawson, 2005, p. 256; Strawson, 2019. Different understandings of the word "physical" in recent philosophy have led to astonishing chaos.

7 "More accurately, our belief in consciousness is an expectation of probable behavior based on an observation of actual behavior, a belief to be confirmed or refuted by more observation, as any other belief in a fact is to be tried out" (Singer, 1911, p. 183). Singer rejected the title "the father of behaviourism".

Well, methodological behaviourism was a very good and fruitful idea. For a few years all went well. Then philosophers came on the scene, and transmogrified a methodology into a metaphysics. They took moderate *methodological* behaviourism, which puts consciousness aside and limits the scientific study of mind to behaviour, and blew it up into mad *metaphysical* behaviourism, which claims that consciousness is nothing more than behaviour and/or dispositions to behaviour.

The problem is clear. On this view, consciousness doesn't exist. Philosophical behaviourism is in fact *eliminativist* with respect to experience, i.e. it denies the existence of experience—even as it denies that it does any such thing. It's a form of *reductive materialism*, as the Cambridge philosopher C. D. Broad pointed out in 1925 when he introduced the term “reductive materialism”, and reductive materialism is indeed eliminativist about experience (Broad, 1925, p. 612).⁸ “No, no”, say the proponents of reductionism, in a kind of massed choir. “Reduction is not elimination”. Formally speaking they're right. Formally speaking, to reduce X to Y isn't to say that X doesn't exist. It's simply to say that X is “really just” Y, that X is “nothing more than” Y, that X is “nothing over and above” Y. And since Y is assumed to exist, X is also held to exist. For although X is nothing more than Y, it's also nothing less than Y. When you reduce chemical processes to physical processes, you don't deny that chemical processes exist. All true. And yet to reduce consciousness to behaviour or dispositions to behaviour is to eliminate it. It is to deny its existence. Given what consciousness is, and what we know it to be, to say that consciousness is really nothing more than behaviour or dispositions to behaviour is to say that it doesn't exist. Reductionists are likely to continue to deny this, or to claim that it begs the question. Formally speaking, it does the beg the question. And begging the question is a well-known theoretical sin. But sometimes —when things get crazy enough— that is exactly what you have to do.

To see this, it helps to compare the behaviourists' reductionist theory of consciousness with the pizza-ists' reductionist theory of consciousness, which states that consciousness is really just pizza. Formally speaking, the pizza theory fully allows that consciousness exists, for pizza certainly exists. So too, philosophical behaviourism fully allows that consciousness exists, because behaviour certainly

8 Two years later, R. W. Sellars uses “reductive materialism” to characterize—and reject—materialism that commits itself to “whole-hearted identification (...) with the principles of an elementary mechanics” (Sellars, 1927, p. 221). In 1938 he speaks of “naïve materialism” in a way that suggests it involves the Denial (Sellars, 1938, p. 468). In 1944 he is presumably referring to the Denial when he stresses that he is “not an *illusionist* with respect to the qualities of human experience” (Sellars, 1944, p. 687).

exists. But to say that experience is just pizza is to deny that consciousness exists, for we know that conscious experience exists, we know what it is like, at least in our own case, and we know that it isn't just pizza. So too for behaviour.⁹

To say that conscious experience is just behaviour and dispositions to behaviour is to looking-glass or reversify the word "consciousness". The comparison may seem harsh, but it's exact.¹⁰ One can say of the philosophical behaviourists what Anthony Collins said of Samuel Clarke in 1708:

his Usage of the Term Consciousness does not make him one jot nearer the Question, than if he had used a different Term, or a Term that no one would suspect stood for the thing really signified by the Term *Consciousness* (1707-8, p. 149).

This then is *philosophical* behaviourism, the first main version of the Denial. It was already stirring in 1921, when Russell published *The Analysis of Mind*, eight years after Watson's paper. It was clearly on the table four years later in 1925, when C. D. Broad devoted several pages to refuting it in his book *The Mind and its Place in Nature* although he worried that he might "be accused of breaking a butterfly on a wheel" in doing so (Broad, 1925, p. 5).

It may be that relatively few psychologists fell into outright philosophical behaviourism, and that it was mostly an affliction of philosophers.¹¹ There was cross-infection; already in 1923 the distinguished psychologist Karl Lashley aimed "to show that the statement, 'I am conscious' does not mean anything more than

9 To beg the question, in a case like this, is to take it for granted that one of two (or more) proposed answers to the question "what is x?" is right (or wrong), when the issue of which answer is right is precisely what is supposed to be in question. Formally speaking, to take it for granted (as I do) that experience isn't pizza, when arguing with someone who holds that it is pizza, is to beg the question. (Georges Rey is correct when he says that there's no non-question-begging way of defending real realism about experience against someone who denies its existence.)

10 Some have objected that the force of the comparison is weakened by the respect in which the behaviourist theory of consciousness is better than the pizza theory (it records certain reliable correlations). This misses the point, which is that the two theories are, in the crucial respect in question, exactly equal in their badness.

11 James Pratt disagrees in 1936: "Particularly our colleagues in the field of psychology have heard the siren voice of Sweet Simplicity. Naturally they desire their subject to be *streng wissenschaftlich* [strictly scientific]; and to make it so they have been willing to pay the price of either denying the existence of consciousness or making it entirely inefficacious]" (Pratt, 1936, p. 166). Edna Heibredner is funny in 1933: Watson "reduc[es] affection to slight reactions set up by tumescence and detumescence of the genitals With the simplicity and finality of the Last Judgment, behaviorism divides the sheep from the goats. On the right side are behaviorism and science and all its works; on the left are souls and superstition and mistaken tradition" (Heibredner, 1933, pp. 236, 241).

the statement that 'such and such physiological processes are going on within me'" (Lashley, 1923, p. 272).¹² But even an austere psychologist like E. G. Boring, one of the leading "operationist" psychologists in the mid-twentieth century, held firmly in 1948 to the view that experience or "consciousness is what you experience immediately" (Boring, 1948, p. 6).

Two years later, however, in 1950, Brian Farrell judged Boring's claim to be a "comical and pathogenic remark" (Farrell, 1950, p. 189). Farrell reckoned that better times were coming. If Western societies truly assimilated the work of the relevant sciences, he thought, "then it is quite possible that the notion of 'experience' will be generally discarded as delusive" (Farrell, 1950, p. 195). As things are, it is only by "restricting the use of the word 'experience' to 'raw feels' [that we can] go on defending the view that 'experience' and 'behaviour' are not identical; and this line of defence is hopeless" (Farrell, 1950, p. 194). In the present state of our language, he says, "the notion of 'experience' can be shown to resemble an occult notion like 'witchcraft' in a primitive community that is in the process of being acculturated to the West" (Farrell, 1950, p. 195). Fortunately, science "is getting to the brink of rejecting [experience] (...) as 'unreal' or 'non-existent'" (Farrell, 1950, pp. 194-195).¹³ At this point the philosophers had left the psychologists in the dust, in the race to folly. It seemed not to matter to the philosophers that even the arch-priest of psychological behaviourism, B. F. Skinner, was against them, when he made it clear in 1953 that "the objection to inner states is not that they do not exist, but that they are not relevant in a functional analysis" (Skinner, 1953, p. 35).

Farrell's thoughts were echoed and varied by, among others, the radical philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend (see e.g. 1962, p. 90) and Richard Rorty (1965), in the vast upsurge of discussion of consciousness that followed the publication of the psychologist Ullin Place's paper "Is consciousness a brain process?" in 1956, and the Australian philosopher Jack Smart's paper "Sensations and Brain processes" in 1959. But by now something else was in play. For philosophers like Rorty were not—or not primarily—motivated by philosophical-behaviourist considerations in their denial of the existence of consciousness. Their

12 He wrongly thought one had to choose between "behaviorism and psychophysical dualism" (Lashley, 1923, p. 245).

13 This is the paper in which Farrell asks "what it would be like to be ... a bat?" (1950, p. 183)—a question later made famous by Nagel (Nagel, 1974). But while Nagel's point is that there is something it is like, experientially, to be a bat, although we cannot know what it is like, Farrell finds the question pointless or unintelligible.

line of thought was in one striking respect far worse. For it does at least follow from philosophical behaviourism that consciousness doesn't really exist. But these philosophers were motivated by a view—a commitment to naturalism—from which it doesn't even begin to follow that consciousness doesn't exist.

3. Naturalism

How come? Naturalism, unsurprisingly, states that everything that concretely exists is entirely natural: nothing supernatural or otherwise non-natural exists.¹⁴ So, given that we know that conscious experience exists, we must as naturalists suppose that it's a wholly natural phenomenon. And given that we're specifically *materialist* naturalists, as almost all naturalists are, we must take it that conscious experience is wholly material or physical. And so we should, because it's beyond reasonable doubt—it's really far beyond reasonable doubt—that experience like ours is wholly a matter of neural goings-on, wholly natural and wholly physical. The fact that this is so has been plain for a long time. It was already clear enough to Hobbes in 1641, and to Margaret Cavendish in 1664, and to Bernard de Fontenelle in 1700, whom Isaiah Berlin called “the most civilised man of his time, and indeed of most times” (1999, p. 148), as it was also to the only person who Berlin in his writings honoured directly with the description “undeluded”, Giacomo Leopardi in 1827; and many others. I think it was no less obvious to Shakespeare in 1606, when Macbeth supposed that “when the brains were out, the man would die”. However this may be, the ever increasing obviousness and availability of the fact that human consciousness is wholly a matter of neural goings-on is the foundation stone for the current widespread commitment to materialism in the philosophy of mind.

It's true that we can't understand how experience can be wholly a matter of neural goings-on in the brain, *when we start out from the way the brain appears to physics or neurophysiology*. But there's no reason to give the way someone's brain appears to physics or neurophysiology priority over the way it appears to them when they're having experience. Rather the reverse, as Russell pointed out as early as 1927, annoying many (and incurring a certain amount of ridicule) when he began to say, truly, and at the time rather thrillingly, that it is only the having of conscious experience that really gives us some insight into the stuff of

¹⁴ Some naturalists also doubt whether there are any moral truths, but I'm putting aside the question of ethics.

the brain, because conscious experience is itself quite literally part of the stuff of which the brain is made. What we come to realize, he said is that “we know nothing of the intrinsic quality of physical phenomena except when they happen to be sensations, and that therefore there is no reason to be surprised that some are sensations” (Russell, 1927b, p. 154). It’s true, again, that we can’t understand how experience can be neural goings-on in the brain when we start out from physics or neurophysiology, but we can’t understand quantum mechanics or gravity or “dark energy” either, and there’s no reason to think that the inability of *physics* to give any sort of characterization of consciousness constitutes an objection to the view that experience is wholly physical. To think this is to make an old and elementary mistake about what physics is and does.

I’ll describe this mistake soon. For the moment the situation is this. It’s beyond reasonable doubt that experience is a wholly neural, wholly physical matter. We have no idea how this can be so, given the other things we know and think we know about neural goings-on, but this is fine, if disappointing. Ignorance is to be expected. We know experience exists, and we know what it is, but we also know that we are in many ways profoundly ignorant of the fundamental nature of things, and the great naturalistic project, spearheaded by physics, hasn’t decreased our sense of fundamental ignorance. It has on the contrary increased it, precisely because of its advances and successes.

Ignoramus: we do not know, as the great German physiologist Emil Du Bois-Reymond announced in 1872, when discussing how conscious experience can be neural goings-on. *Ignorabimus*, he went on to say: we will not know how conscious experience can be neural goings-on. John Tyndall made the same point in his famous Belfast Address in 1874, causing Mrs Whitefield, in Bernard Shaw’s play *Man and Superman*, published in 1903, to observe most plaintively that “nothing has been right since that speech that Professor Tyndall made at Belfast”.¹⁵

So I can’t agree with Henry Perowne, the neurosurgeon in Ian McEwan’s novel *Saturday*, who wonders whether it could

ever be explained (...) how matter becomes conscious (...), [and] can’t begin to imagine a satisfactory account, but (...) knows it will come, the secret will be revealed —over decades, as long as the scientists and the institutions remain in place, the explanations will refine themselves into an irrefutable truth about consciousness (McEwan, 2005, p. 255).

¹⁵ Shaw (1903, p. 164 (Act 4)); Tyndall (1874) had already made the point eloquently in earlier papers; see e.g. Tyndall (1868).

4. Materialism and the Very Large Mistake

Here we are. We're naturalists, passionate naturalists, and indeed materialists. We are therefore and of course outright realists about consciousness. We are real materialists, serious, realistic materialists, i.e. materialists who are fully realist about conscious experience, and we understand and confess our ignorance. Time to get back to work on specific problems, physical, psychological, and philosophical.

But now something extraordinary happens, in the middle of the twentieth century. Members of a small but influential group of analytic philosophers who consider themselves to be standard bearers for a truly rigorous naturalism form the view that true *naturalistic materialism rules out realism about consciousness*. So they conclude that consciousness doesn't exist. How is this possible? Let me try to set it out in small steps.

They reach their conclusion in spite of the fact that

[1] conscious experience is a wholly natural phenomenon

—a thoroughly common-or-garden natural phenomenon, at least on this planet; and in spite of the fact that

[2] conscious experience is a wholly natural phenomenon whose existence is certain, more certain than any other natural phenomenon;

and in spite of the fact that

[3] conscious experience is a wholly natural phenomenon with whose nature we are directly acquainted, at least in certain fundamental respects, simply in having experience.¹⁶

Unfazed by—even perhaps somewhat contemptuous of— [1]-[3], these philosophers cleave to a conception of the natural according to which experience isn't and can't be a natural phenomenon. So they endorse the Denial.

16 Isn't the qualification "at least in certain fundamental respects" unnecessary, given the terminological ruling in note 2? It's still necessary if one holds that the overall experiential "what-it's-like" of a person *x*'s experience *e* can have features of which *x* isn't aware in having *e* (It's also necessary, of course, if one puts aside the ruling in note 2 and takes the full description of the nature of *e* to involve use of the numbers 1, 6, and 8 because it involves reference to hydrogen, carbon, and oxygen).

First of all—and as observed—almost all these philosophers (perhaps all of them) take naturalism to entail materialism. And, just like Descartes, they claim that

[4] conscious experience can’t possibly be physical.

Like Descartes (or rather official Descartes), they think they know this. And since, as self-styled naturalists, they think that

[5] everything that exists is natural

and, as specifically materialist naturalists, that

[6] everything natural is material or physical,

they’re obliged to conclude that

[7] experience doesn’t really exist,

because [7] follows logically from [4], [5], and [6]. So they are—become—eliminativists with respect to consciousness, although many of them conceal this by using the word “consciousness” to mean something—a certain sort of sensitivity to the environment—that has nothing essentially to do with conscious experience.

In particular, the self-styled naturalists think that

[8] the existence of experience is incompatible with the findings of natural science and in particular physics.

The immediate and inevitable corollary of [8], given [2], is that

[9] physics is false.

But they don’t draw this conclusion. Nor should they. All they need to do is give up [4], the wholly unwarranted Cartesian claim that causes all the trouble. But instead they endorse the Denial.

The Deniers’ alliance with Descartes on this point is very rum, for they routinely revile Descartes. It gets a lot rummer when one reflects that all their materialist forebears, stretching back over 2000 years to atomist materialists like Leucippus and Democritus (not to mention many of the “Church Fathers”), completely reject the view that experience can’t be physical. These older thinkers

hold, as all serious or realistic materialists must, that experience is indeed wholly physical.¹⁷

Russell made the key observation in 1927: “we do not know enough of the intrinsic character of events outside us to say whether it does or does not differ from that of ‘mental’ events” whose nature we do know (Russell, 1927b, p. 221). He never wavered from this point, and constantly stressed that any remotely plausible theory of the nature of reality had to suppose an absolutely fundamental *continuity* between our own mental events, whose nature we do know, and all other events in reality (see e.g. Russell, 1927a, pp. 6, 216, 263-264). In 1948 he noted that physics simply can’t tell us “whether the physical world is, or is not, different in intrinsic character from the world of mind” (Russell, 1948, p. 240).¹⁸ In 1950 he remarked that “we know nothing about the intrinsic quality of physical events except when these are mental events that we directly experience” (Russell, 1950, p. 153).

But the Deniers weren’t listening —and they still aren’t. They’re still in bed with Descartes, even as they continue to ridicule his other views. This is a fine irony, and it’s compounded by the fact that —behind his official front, and in the face of the unanswerable objections that Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia put to him in their correspondence— Descartes himself felt that he hadn’t in fact been able to rule out the possibility he discussed with the Dutch philosopher Regius; the possibility, in Regius’s words, that “mind could be (...) a mode of a corporeal substance” (Regius, 1647, p. 294).

The question is this: why do these preening twentieth-century eliminative materialists ignore a long line of distinguished materialist predecessors and ally themselves with Descartes, of all people, their sworn enemy, in holding that experience can’t possibly be physical —thereby obliging themselves to endorse the Denial?

The answer appears to be this. They appear to share with Descartes (and Leibniz, and many others at the time) one very large assumption: the assumption that

17 Materialism appears to be orthodox in early Christianity. Tyndall cites Tertullian (c. 155–240 BCE), an outright materialist, and “wonders what would have happened to this Christian Father amid the roaring lions [i.e. the “orthodox” nineteenth-century Christians] of Belfast who would have wished to tear him apart” (Tyndall, 1876, p. 349). It’s worth comparing the position of certain of the *mutakallimun* in Islam.

18 It is well made by Kant, in his own idiom, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. See e.g. Kant 1781–87, A358–A360, A379–A380, B427–8.

[10] we have got the nature of the physical pretty much taped, at least in certain very fundamental respects.

More moderately, they share the assumption that we can know that [4] is true:

[11] we know enough about the physical to be certain that experience can't be physical.

They take it that we have a theory of the physical that is not only essentially correct as far as it goes (in spite of difficulties with things like quantum gravity, dark energy, and so on), but also goes all the way, at least in certain fundamental respects, and in particular in allowing us to be certain that [4] is true: that experience isn't physical.

It's easy to see how, in Descartes's day, the high and heady days of corpuscularian contact mechanics, [10] and/or [11] might have seemed to be correct. Matter, according to corpuscularian mechanics, consisted of little bits with various shapes bumping into and hooking up with each other in various ways. There was nothing more to it, and it seemed evident that it couldn't possibly be, or be the vehicle or ground of, conscious experience.

Looking back, the intuition seems pretty excusable.¹⁹ Certainly it seems more excusable then than today, when relativistic quantum field theory has dissolved the gritty particles of the past into theoretical posits that are not well thought of as persisting things, fleeting appearances produced by changing energy levels in the set of vibratory motions in fields.²⁰ I like David Wallace's comment:

the popular impression of particle physics as about the behavior of lots of little point particles whizzing about bears about as much relation to real particle physics as the earth/air/fire/water theory of matter bears to the Periodic Table (Wallace, 2013, p. 220).

We can see why [10] and [11] might have seemed plausible in the seventeenth century. But they were unwarranted, then as now, as Hobbes, Cavendish and others already saw at the time, and as Hume also saw. The Cartesians, Hume remarked,

19 The excuse has limited force, for the idea of solid extended particles was already powerfully in question in the eighteenth century, and by the nineteenth century “the tiny particle had become an empty tradition” (Lange, 1865-73, p. 2.364).

20 The nature of these fields is still unclear, but the general field idea (along with the general idea that all forms of concrete reality are forms of energy) seems, intuitively, less inimical to the view that experience is a state or form of matter.

“established it as a principle that we are *perfectly acquainted* with the essence of matter” (Hume, 1739, p. 159, my emphasis). This was a very large mistake.

250 years later, in 1994, one of the most influential philosophers of our time—David Lewis—makes exactly the same mistake. He asks us to “remember that the physical nature of ordinary matter under mild conditions is very well understood” (Lewis, 1994, p. 292). It’s true that this isn’t a claim of perfect acquaintance, but it is a version of [10], and it’s a central part of a position according to which [11] we know enough about the physical to know that experience can’t be physical. A year later Lewis writes that “the most formidable opposition to any form of mind-body identity comes from the friends of qualia” (Lewis, 1995, p. 106).²¹ In so doing he rejects the time-honoured *mind-body identity theory*, the ancient materialist view that mental goings-on, including of course all experiential goings-on, are wholly bodily goings-on (in particular neural goings-on).

I say that Lewis rejects the mind-body identity theory. Many think he accepts it, including Lewis himself. But consider the above quotation: “the most formidable opposition to any form of mind-body identity comes from the friends of qualia”. This is enough to show that he rejects mind-body identity, because any genuine identity theory, any remotely serious or realistic identity theory, claims precisely that *qualia* (along with all other mental goings-on) are identical with neural goings-on. One can’t even begin to embrace mind-body identity unless one is a “friend of qualia”, because only then does one acknowledge the existence of one of the two apparently non-identical things that any genuine mind-body identity theory claims to be the same thing. You can’t claim to assert the identity of two seemingly distinct things when you simply leave out one of the two seemingly distinct things you are claiming to be really the same thing.²²

21 “Qualia” (singular “quale”) is a popular term for aspects of the experiential-qualitative character of experience. Its current use is thought to derive principally from C. I. Lewis (1929, pp. 60, 121-6; see also Pratt, 1936, p. 155, Jacobs, 1937, p. 607-9), but there are clear and important earlier uses. Dewey speaks of “the absolute, final, irreducible and inexpugnable concrete *quale* which everything experienced not so much *has as is*” (Dewey, 1905, p. 397). William James examines the “*quale* of spatiality ... an inseparable element bound up with the other peculiarities of each and every one of our sensations” (James, 1890, p. 786). Philosophers still squabble about what the word means, but a quale can safely be taken to be a matter of the qualitative character of experience as defined in §1—e.g. the experiential “what-it-is-like” of sneezing, smelling burnt paper, being caught looking through a keyhole, walking on hot sand, and so on.

22 In 1949 the real materialist R. W. Sellars *et al.* write that “simple or reductionist identity views of mental and bodily processes ... are ... obviously excluded” by “modern materialism” (Sellars *et al.*, 1949, p. viii). Lewis and many who follow him are not real or modern materialists.

In effect, the quoted passage proves Lewis’s adherence to [4], the Cartesian view that experience can’t be physical, from which it follows that the identity theory is false.²³ It’s a good illustration of the way in which *faux*-materialist assumptions have entered into the language of the present-day debate so deeply that they have become invisible or inaudible to many who participate in it. Lewis’s “identity theory” is explicitly functionalist, in addition to being materialist, and full-on functionalism is eliminativist, as remarked in §1.²⁴

So even David Lewis went astray. But he’s simply one of the most distinguished of the many false materialists who claim that

[12] the mind-body (mind-brain) identity theory is true in some version
but who also believe that

[13] to believe in the existence of consciousness is to deny the identity of mental phenomena and physical or bodily phenomena.

The trouble is that to endorse [12] and [13] is to hold that

[14] consciousness is no part of mind.

But consciousness is certainly part of mind, if it exists at all. So to endorse [12] and [13] is to hold that consciousness doesn’t exist. But consciousness is a wholly natural phenomenon whose existence is certain ([2])—a fundamental aspect of the existence of the wholly natural phenomenon of mind.

The conclusion is secure. Lewis and all other *faux* materialists reject mind-body identity. They ought perhaps to have listened more carefully to Russell (from 1927 on), or Herbert Feigl (1958, 1967), or Grover Maxwell (1978), or many others. They ought to have paid more heed to their great exemplar W. V. Quine,

23 Jackson and Chalmers also hold this view (see e.g. Jackson, 1982; Chalmers, 1996). So does Smart, all things considered (it is less clear), and we might well call it the “Australian” line, although it’s not clear that Place also follows it. These philosophers may be particularly influenced by considerations relating to the completeness of physics (the causal closure of the physical) of the kind set out by Papineau in his explanation of the rise of physicalism (see Papineau, 2001), although these considerations are not I think an essential part of the explanation of the error.

24 “According to *functionalism*, understood as a doctrine in the philosophy of mind, the *essential* or *defining* feature of any type of mental states [including conscious states] is the set of causal relations it bears to (...) bodily behavior” (Churchland, 1984, p. 36). According to functionalism, therefore, what we ordinarily think of as a conscious state (pain, colour-experience) has nothing essentially to do with actual conscious experience.

renowned for his reductive passion and commitment to naturalism, but also fully realist about what he called the “heady luxuriance of experience (. . .) experience in all its richness” (Quine, 1981, p. 185). They might also have listened to the physicists interviewed by J. W. N. Sullivan in 1930-1931: to Schrödinger, who thinks “that the material universe and consciousness are made out of the same stuff” (Schrödinger, 1931, p. 16); to de Broglie, who “regard[s] consciousness and matter as different aspects of one thing” (de Broglie, 1931, p. 15); to Eddington, who thinks that “when we speak of the existence of the material universe we are presupposing consciousness” (Eddington, 1930, p. 12); to Planck, who “regard[s] consciousness as fundamental [and] matter as derivative from consciousness” (Planck, 1931, p. 17; a year later Einstein misunderstands this position [Einstein et al. 1932, p. 212-213]). When these men say “consciousness” they mean consciousness in the standard sense, qualia, which essentially includes qualia, the what-it-is-like of experience.

Herbert Feigl remembers a conversation with Einstein in Princeton in 1954 in which he asked Einstein whether he thought that “the qualities of immediate experience” would be left out in an ideally perfect representation of the universe—given that they are not accounted for in physics. Einstein “replied in his characteristic, humorous manner (I translate from the German in which he used a rather uncouth word): ‘Why, if it weren’t for this “internal illumination” [consciousness] the world would be nothing but a pile of dirt!’” (Feigl, 1958/1967, p. 138). I guess that the word he used was “*Scheissehaufen*”.

So, general disaster—and a further mystery: one of the strangest things about the spread of the naturalism-based Denial in the second half of the twentieth century is that it involved overlooking a point about physics that was a commonplace in philosophical discussions of mind in the first half of the century. I call it “the silence of physics” (See e.g. Strawson 2017a).

5. The silence of physics

Physics is magnificent. Vast numbers of its claims are either straightforwardly true or very good approximations to truth. The periodic table is on to something fundamental about the ultimate nature of concrete reality, the stuff of the universe. So are formulae like $f=ma$, $e=mc^2$, the inverse square laws, and so on. But, crucially, all these truths about physical reality, outright or approximate, are expressed by statements of number or equations: mathematical equations featuring various

constants in addition to various numbers and mathematical functions. They are, as such, truths about quantities and relational structures instantiated in concrete reality, truths that don't tell us anything at all about the intrinsic *non-structural* or *structure-transcendent* or nature of the thing or things that exemplify them —the fundamental stuff of physical reality; where to call something “structure-transcendent” is just to say that there is more to its being than just structure (it's not to say that structure isn't essential to its being).

Eddington's assessment of the situation in 1928 is as true now as it was then:

something unknown is doing we don't know what—that is what our theory [physics] amounts to. It does not sound a particularly illuminating theory. I have read something like it elsewhere—

the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.

There is the same suggestion of activity. There is the same indefiniteness as to the nature of the activity and of what it is that it is doing. And yet from so unpromising a beginning we really do get somewhere. We bring into order a host of apparently unrelated phenomena; we make predictions, and our predictions come off. The reason —the sole reason— for this progress is that our description is not limited to unknown agents, executing unknown activities, but *numbers* are scattered freely in the description. To contemplate electrons circulating in the atom carries us no further; but by contemplating eight circulating electrons in one atom and seven circulating atoms in another we begin to realise the difference between oxygen and nitrogen. Eight slithy toves gyre and gimble in the oxygen wabe; seven in nitrogen (Eddington, 1928, p. 291).

“Physics is mathematical”, as Russell wrote a year earlier, “not because we know so much about the physical world, but because we know so little” (1927b, p. 163). “The physical world”, he wrote in 1948, “is only known as regards certain abstract features of its space-time structure (...) we know nothing about the events that make matter, except their space-time structure” (Russell, 1948, p. 240; 1950, p. 158).²⁵ The point is extremely simple. Physics may tell us a great deal about the structure of physical reality in so far as it can be logico-mathematically represented, but it can't tell us anything about the intrinsic nature of reality in so far as its intrinsic nature is more than its structure. Physics, in Stephen Hawking's words, is “just a

25 For Newman's objection and Russell's response, see Newman, 1928; Russell, 1928; for discussion, see Demopoulous and Friedman, 1985. A purely mathematical characterization of spacetime necessarily leaves out the specifically *spatiotemporal* character of spacetime; so to take physics to convey (descriptively represent) the spatiotemporality of spacetime structure is to take it to have more content than purely mathematical content.

set of rules and equations”. It leaves open the question “what ... breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe” (Hawking, 1988, p. 174).

There’s a lot to say about this (see e.g. Lockwood, 1989, 1993, 2003; Strawson, 1999, 2003; Hayek, 1952). My present task is simply to record it, note its high visibility in the 1920s and 1930s, its occlusion in philosophy of mind in the second half of the twentieth century, and the fact that it destroys the position of many of those today who—covertly or overtly—endorse the naturalism-based Denial. When we realize —when we really realize— that “our knowledge of the objects treated in physics consists solely of ... a schedule of pointer readings [on instrument dials] (...) and other indicators”, in Eddington’s words again, we must ask “what knowledge have we of the nature of atoms [e.g.] that renders it at all incongruous that they should constitute a thinking [experiencing/conscious] object?” (1928, p. 259). The answer is: none (it’s not as if the conservation principles or the principle of the causal closure of the physical make any difference).²⁶ “The schedule is, we agree, attached to some unknown background”, Eddington continues, but it is, precisely, unknown, “un-get-at-able” (Eddington, 1928, pp. 257, 259). So “it seems rather silly”, Eddington concludes, “to prefer to attach it to something of a so-called ‘concrete’ nature inconsistent with thought [or conscious experience], and then to wonder where the thought [or experience] comes from” (1928, p. 259).

So when as passionate hard-nosed physicalist naturalists —with noses as hard as you like— we consider the problem of experience (consciousness), we encounter the silence of physics. The self-styled naturalists seem to ignore this point about what physics is and does. They rely instead on an *imaginative picture* of the physical, a *feeling-picture* that goes radically beyond anything that physics tells or could tell us. They are, in Russell’s words, “guilty, unconsciously and in spite of explicit disavowals, of a *confusion in their imaginative picture*” of reality (Russell, 1927a, p. 382), a picture that is provably incorrect if physicalism is indeed true, because in that case experience is wholly physical but is excluded from the picture.

6. Folly

The facts of the Denial —the irredeemably twentieth-century facts— are now before us, and we have an account of how they arose: first from a mistaken interpretation

²⁶ The causal closure principle is usually understood to state that every physical occurrence can in principle be given an exhaustive explanation wholly in the terms of physics.

—a radical-empiricist deformation— of behaviourism, then from a crippling error about what a naturalistic attitude to reality requires.

I think, though, that we still lack a satisfactory explanation of the Denial, so long as we lack a satisfactory explanation of how these mistakes could have been made. How could anybody ever have been led to do something so silly as to deny the existence of conscious experience, the only general thing we know for certain to exist? How is it possible?

This question brings me to my somewhat pessimistic peroration: an attempt to explain how the silliest thing that has ever been said came to be said. I think the explanation is in fact simple, and it's pretty old, and I'm now going things to hand over to my elders and betters.

The fact is that there is, as Cicero says, "no statement so absurd that no philosopher will make it" (44 BCE, 2.58.119). He explicitly says that he doesn't know why this is so, but he knows it is so. Descartes agrees in 1637: "nothing can be imagined which is too strange or incredible to have been said by some philosopher" (Descartes, 1637, p. 118). Louise Antony agrees in 2007: "there is ... no banality so banal that no philosopher will deny it" (Antony, 2007, p. 114). The mischievous Thomas Reid agrees: "there is nothing so absurd which some philosophers have not maintained" (Reid, 1785, p. 124).²⁷

Descartes has more to say: when it comes to speculative matters, he says, "the scholar (...) will take (...) the more pride [in his views] the further they are from common sense (...), since he will have had to use so much more skill and ingenuity in trying to render them plausible" (Descartes, 1637, p. 115). He reckons that "those who have never studied judge much more reliably and clearly about salient matters than those who have spent all their time in the Schools" (Descartes, 1618-28, p. 16). C. D. Broad agrees, 300 years later: some ideas are "so preposterously silly that only very learned men could have thought of them" (Broad, 1925, p. 623).

"Silly" seems the perfect word in this context, and Broad offers us an explicit definition of the term: "By a 'silly' theory I mean one which may be held at the

27 Reid particularly enjoyed baiting Hume, and followed up his misrepresentation of one of Hume's views by remarking that it "is like a hobby-horse, which a man in bad health may ride in his closet, without hurting his reputation; but if he should take him [the hobby-horse] abroad with him to church, or to the exchange, or to the play house, his heir would immediately call a jury, and seize his estate" (Reid, 1764, p. §2.6).

time when one is talking or writing professionally, but which only an inmate of a lunatic asylum would think of carrying into daily life” (Broad, 1925, p. 5).

Well, we know silliness happens, but we may still wonder how it is possible. Perhaps we need to add one of the brilliant details of Darwin’s theory of evolution into the explanatory mix: his theory of sexual selection. Perhaps wild views are like peacock’s tails. Or perhaps we should turn psychoanalytical. It can seem exciting to hold views that seem preposterously contrary to common sense. There seems to be something Oedipally thrilling about it —where the father figure is an old gentleman called Ordinary Opinion.²⁸

Herbert Feigl adds another psychoanalytical note: “Scholars cathect [or invest] certain ideas so strongly and their outlook becomes so ego involved that they erect elaborate barricades of defenses, merely to protect their pet ideas from the blows (or the slower corrosive effects) of criticism” (Feigl, 1958/1967, p. 6). “Long indulgence in error makes right thinking almost impossible”, as William James observes (James, 1890, p. 521). He’s backed up by Thomas Brown:

as it is easier for a theorist to struggle with the most stubborn discrepancy than to abandon a favourite system, he has recourse to circumstances, which, though they leave precisely the same difficulty as before, are at least more complicated, and therefore better fitted to hide an inconsistency from the author himself, as well as from those whom he addresses (Brown, 1806, pp. 119-120).²⁹

These facts are surely part of the explanation of why, as Hobbes notes, “arguments seldom work on men of wit and learning when they have once engaged themselves in a contrary opinion” (Hobbes, 1645, p. 41). And Descartes is right again when he says that “it frequently happens that even when we know that something is false, we get used to hearing it, and thus gradually get into the habit of regarding it as true. Confident assertion and frequent repetition are the two ploys that are often more effective than the most weighty arguments when dealing with ordinary people or those [including philosophers] who do not examine things carefully” (Descartes,

28 “Perhaps it appeals particularly to the young in philosophy (the intoxication of iconoclasm); or, more generally, to anyone who gets stuck at the “Oedipal” stage of philosophical education, at which one feels a powerful desire to prove one’s independence from Ordinary Opinion (*sc* the Authority of the Father)” (Strawson, 1989, p. 89).

29 Compare Francis Bacon: “once the human mind has favoured certain views ... it pulls everything else into agreement with and support for them. Should they be outweighed by more powerful countervailing considerations, it either fails to notice these, or scorns them, or makes fine distinctions in order to neutralize and so reject them ... thereby preserving untouched the authority of its previous position” (Bacon, 1620, §1.46).

1641-2, p. 358). This is what psychologists now call "the familiarity effect" or "mere-exposure effect".

Yes, yes, you say, but really, even so, and after all, and for the love of Mike (as they say in the UK), how is it possible? Once again I turn to Russell. Philosophers can say something this absurd, he says, writing in 1940, because they have "a long training in absurdity" (Russell, 1940, p. 116). Russell thinks in fact, that there are things that "only philosophers with a long training in absurdity could succeed in believing" (Russell, 1940, p. 116). Some people are untroubled by the fact that there's so much foolishness. Philosophy, for some, is above all a form of agonistic play, as the Dutch historian of ideas Johan Huizinga once remarked.³⁰ Some find a kind of joy in it, either naturally or because they cultivate theoretical polymorphous perversity (perhaps in the manner of late Feyerabend). A good number of philosophers aren't really much concerned with truth rather than with Rube Goldberg ingenuity, Professor Branestawm contraptions. Many, however, can't help caring intensely about truth, even as they smile with Santayana when he begins a book with the words "here is one more system of philosophy. If the reader is tempted to smile, I can assure him that I smile with him" (Santayana, 1923, p. v).

But it isn't just philosophers. All scholars are in the dock. And now Mark Twain generalizes the point to the whole species, noting that "There isn't anything so grotesque or so incredible that the average human being can't believe it" (Twain, 1906, p. 136). The Nobel-prize winning behavioural economist Daniel Kahneman backs up Twain's claim with experimental data: "we know that people can maintain an unshakable faith in any proposition, however absurd, when they are sustained by a community of like-minded believers" (Kahneman, 2011, p. 217). We are as a species horribly adept at "doublethink", "double book-keeping" of a sort that allows us to hold two beliefs that are in fact inconsistent. Many of us imprint on what we are taught early on. We feel the need for closure. We "seize and freeze", as the social psychologists say (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996).

30 "Competition is an outstanding feature of the whole development of Scholasticism and the Universities. The lasting vogue for the problem of "universals" as the central theme of philosophic discussion, which led to the split between the Realists and the Nominalists, was probably agonistic at bottom and sprang from the fundamental need to form parties on a point at issue ... the controversy is still unresolved today. The whole functioning of the mediaeval University was profoundly agonistic and ludic. The everlasting disputations which took the place of our learned discussions in periodicals, etc., ... the grouping of scholars into *nationes*, the divisions and subdivisions, the schisms, the unbridgeable gulfs—all these are phenomena belonging to the sphere of competition and play-rules" (Huizinga, 1938, p. 155–156).

This is the baseline explanation of how philosophers in the twentieth century came to hold the silliest view ever held in the history of human thought. “Here, truly”, said the undeluded Leopardi, speaking specifically about the conviction that consciousness can’t be physical, “the poor old human intellect has behaved more childishly than any in any other matter” (Leopardi, 1827, p. 1885). Next to the Denial, every known religious belief is only a little less sensible than the belief that grass is green. And so it falls to philosophy, not religion, to reveal the deepest weirdness of the human mind. I find this upsetting—but at least philosophy doesn’t have so much blood on its hands.³¹

7. Truth

Truth, especially difficult truth, does not on the whole prevail in philosophy. It often emerges in patches and finds favour for a while, but then it sinks back down again under layers of misdirected cleverness, carelessness, colossal ignorance of past work, and stupidity. Schopenhauer thinks truth is “granted only a short victory celebration between the two long periods of time when it is condemned as paradoxical or disparaged as trivial” (1819, p. xxv). I suspect that Isaiah Berlin would have agreed, and so do I, except that I don’t think anything in philosophy is ever seriously disparaged by being called “trivial”. To be trivial, to be a truism, is to be true, and that is already good in philosophy.

Schopenhauer was pessimistic. That’s not news. Even so, I don’t suppose he ever imagined that the existence of experience would be doubted or denied. I suspect that he would have agreed with William James that “there is but one indefectibly certain truth, and that is the truth that pyrrhonic scepticism itself leaves standing, —the truth that the present phenomenon of consciousness exists”; this is, he wrote, “the *inconcussum* [the unknockable-out thing] in a world most of whose other facts have at some time tottered in the breath of philosophic doubt” (James, 1896, p. 466; 1890, p. 185). But Schopenhauer, like James, hadn’t reckoned

31 Uriah Kriegel suggested (in conversation) that there is a sillier claim: nothing exists. It’s a strong candidate. I think, however, that the Denial is *perfectly* silly (on a scale from 0 to 1 it has a silliness index of 1), so that although the claim that nothing exists is stronger (it entails but is not entailed by the Denial), it isn’t sillier. Nor am I sure that the claim that nothing exists has ever been seriously and unequivocally defended—by an accredited theorist who wasn’t stoned (I stand ready to be corrected). Certainly some have said that all is illusion, but in that case illusion, at least, must exist, and also someone-or-something that is deluded, and in that case it is not true that nothing exists.

with the twentieth century, and I don’t think even his rigorous pessimism could have prepared him for the Denial.

Recent political events have made these observations about human credulity seem vastly less surprising than they did five years ago. But when it comes to silliness, I think that the Denial of the existence of consciousness takes the biscuit.

Appendix: Dunking Dennett

*Let us once again assail your ears,
That are so fortified against our story*

Shakespeare *Hamlet* 1.1

1. In March 2018 I published an abridged version of this paper online (Strawson, 2018a). In it I noted that Daniel Dennett is a prominent member of the tiny group of people who deny the existence of consciousness. Professor Dennett responded online on April 3rd, denying that he is a Denier, as most (but not all) Deniers do: “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” (Dennett, 2018).

Doesn’t that settle the matter? No; when Dennett says that consciousness exists he *reversifies* or *looking-glasses* the ordinary meaning of the word “consciousness”. That is, he uses the word in such a way that what he means by it *excludes what the word actually means*. More moderately: he uses the word in such a way that what he means by it excludes what it is standardly (almost universally) used to mean —especially in discussions of this sort.

It isn’t possible to defeat this kind of terminological move. When philosophers start to defend indefensible positions they fool with words. Humpty Dumpty comes into his own.³² But one can at least hope to show that this is what is going on.³³

It’s true and important that the word “consciousness” has a number of different legitimate uses: Alexander Bain recorded thirteen distinct “acceptations

32 “‘When I use a word’, Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean —neither more nor less’” (Carroll, 1871, ch. 6).

33 “‘Of course there are beliefs and desires; but they aren’t quite the sorts of things you think they are. In fact, they are dispositions to behave.’ (This is the usual philosophical game of ‘I can say anything you can say; but I won’t mean what you do when I say it’. Cf. Berkeley: ‘Of course there are tables and chairs; but they’re a lot like after-images’)” (Fodor, 2008, p. 12).

of the word in current use” in 1865; Samuel Clarke found five senses as early as 1707 (Bain, 1865, p. 555-561; Collins, 1707-8, p. 177). These provide rich material for confusion and uncertainty, quite independently of Humpty Dumpty. I think that it is nevertheless possible to make it sufficiently clear what Dennett means by “consciousness”, and thereby make it clear that he endorses the Denial. He is in fact the leading prophet of the Denial in our time, and it’s worth recording a few of his pronouncements.

2. Philosophers use the word “zombie” as a technical term, as Dennett observes. “A philosopher’s zombie”, he writes, temporarily using the word “conscious” in the standard way in order to introduce the term “zombie”, “is behaviorally indistinguishable from a normal human being, but is not conscious” (Dennett, 1991, p. 405). The zombie is, perhaps, a piece of brilliant non-biological machinery with fleshlike covering. In any case it looks and acts like a human being although —again in Dennett’s words— “there is nothing it is like to be a zombie; it just seems that way to observers” (Dennett, 1991, p. 405).³⁴

Plainly the zombie isn’t conscious in the standard, rich, “qualia”-involving sense of “conscious”. It doesn’t feel pain when its arm is shot off, any more than the “terminator” played by Arnold Schwarzenegger does in the 1984 film *The Terminator* (or indeed in the admirable 1991 sequel *Terminator 2*).

“Are zombies possible?” Dennett asks. “They’re not just possible”, he replies, “they’re actual. We’re all zombies” (Dennett, 1991, p. 406). Here his view seems very plain. His view is that we’re not conscious at all in the ordinary sense of “conscious”. He adds a footnote —“it would be an act of desperate intellectual dishonesty to quote this assertion out of context!” (Dennett, 1991, p. 406)— so I hope that I have provided sufficient context. But let me provide some more.

“The idea that there is something like a “phenomenal field” of “phenomenal properties” *in addition to* the informational/functional properties accommodated by my theory” of consciousness, Dennett writes, “is shown to be a multi-faceted illusion, an artifact of bad theorizing” (Dennett, 1993a, p. 891). Here he is clear about what he does and doesn’t mean by “consciousness”: consciousness is nothing over and above the possession of certain “informational/functional properties”. Zombies are by definition creatures that have all the informational/functional properties

34 Note that this zombie, once standard, is not the same as the currently popular (and theoretically less helpful) zombie who is supposed to be a perfect physical duplicate of a conscious human being, in addition to being outwardly and behaviourally indistinguishable from such a human being.

that we do. That is how they can be and are behaviourally indistinguishable from us. They are therefore conscious, on Dennett’s terms, in every sense that we are —although “there is nothing it is like to be a zombie”.

Replying to Frank Jackson in 1993, Dennett is unequivocal: “let me confirm Jackson’s surmise that I am his behaviorist; I unhesitatingly endorse the claim that ‘necessarily, if two organisms are behaviorally exactly alike, they are psychologically exactly alike’” (Dennett, 1993b, p. 923, quoting Jackson, 1993, p. 902).

This is why Dennett can say that “*of course*, consciousness exists”. It’s just that the consciousness he claims to exist isn’t *consciousness* —actual consciousness. It’s looking-glassed consciousness, zombie consciousness, consciousness of the sort that a creature has when it is “behaviorally indistinguishable from a normal human being, but is not conscious” (Dennett, 1991, p. 405): not conscious in the standard sense of the term. “*Of course*, consciousness exists”, according to Dennett. But there is on his view nothing it is like, experientially, to be me or you: there is no feeling, no pain, no colour experience —nothing of that sort. Anthony Collins might have had Dennett in mind (rather than Samuel Clarke) when he said that

his Usage of the Term Consciousness does not make him one jot nearer the Question, than if he had used a different Term, or a Term that no one would suspect stood for the thing really signified by the Term *Consciousness* (1707-8, p. 149).

Dennett summarized his position in an interview in *The New York Times* in 2013: “The elusive subjective conscious experience —the redness of red, the painfulness of pain— that philosophers call qualia? Sheer illusion” (Dennett, 2013c). He repeated the point in a podcast the same year. We find in nature “any number of varieties of stupendous organization and sensitivity and discrimination (...). The idea that, in addition to all of those, there’s this extra special something —subjectivity— what distinguishes us from the zombie —that’s an illusion” (Dennett, 2013b). He re-expressed the idea in a book also published in that year:

When I squint just right, it *does* sort of seem that consciousness must be something in addition to all the things it does for us and to us, some special private glow or *here-I-am-ness* that would be absent in any robot But I’ve learned not to credit the hunch. I think it is a flat-out mistake, a failure of imagination (Dennett, 2013a, p. 285).

3. It seems to me that these quotations settle the case. Whatever obscurities remain, the quotations make it sufficiently clear what Dennett means by “consciousness”. In so doing they make it completely clear that he is a Denier.

At one point Dennett says that his view “has plenty of room for inner processes (...), feelings, pains”. Then he qualifies: “but only so long as these are understood to be physical (“informational” or “computational”) processes” (Dennett, 2003, p. 31).³⁵ He wonders whether William James would really have disagreed: “would he really have insisted that what *he* meant by the stream of consciousness had to be sharply distinguished from the streams of mere information-manipulation discernible in the activities of cortical subsystems, etc.?” (2003, p. 32). Would James really have disagreed, in other terms, that consciousness is nothing but “fame in the brain”, “cerebral celebrity”, where this is wholly a matter of “informational” or “computational” influence of a kind that is to be found in “zombies” as much as in ourselves? (Dennett, 1993b, p. 929; 2001, p. 224).³⁶

The answer to Dennett’s question is yes: William James would have disagreed. It’s important to be clear that there is no suffering if the Denial is true. Deniers like Dennett deny this, but when we enquire into what they mean by suffering, we find (again) that zombies—and robots—can suffer in every sense in which we do. So, really, there’s no suffering—no real suffering.

There’s no joy either, no feeling at all. But what can sometimes seem most important is that there is no suffering—in spite of clinical depression and thousands of other extraordinarily painful diseases, murder, rape, famine, slavery, bereavement, torture, genocide. What is more, no one has ever really caused anyone any pain. The problem of evil—the great and insuperable problem for those who believe

35 All remotely realistic materialists or physicalists (i.e. all materialists or physicalists who are real realists about consciousness) fully agree that all feelings are wholly physical. One reason why they find no difficulty in this idea is that they know that the nature of a physical thing *x* (e.g. pain) doesn’t have to be fully expressible in the profoundly abstract descriptive terms of physics if *x* is to be wholly physical. What they object to here is the glossing of “physical” as “informational” and “computational”, which excludes the actual painfulness of pain: the experiential or “qualial” painfulness of pain that makes pain pain. More generally, all realistic materialists (i.e. all serious or as I like to say *real* materialists) are clear on the vital point that *being a wholly physical phenomenon doesn’t exclude being a conscious or “what-it-is-like” phenomenon*. The contrary view is widespread today, but it has no scientific support. This was very well known in the philosophical community 100 years ago. See e.g. Russell (1927a, 1927b), also Maxwell (1978).

36 Consciousness is “cerebral celebrity—nothing more and nothing less. Those contents are conscious that persevere, that monopolize resources long enough to achieve certain typical and ‘symptomatic’ effects—on memory, on the control of behavior and so forth” (Dennett, 1993, p. 929). Later he adjusts the metaphor in a characteristically vivid way: “consciousness is not so much fame, then, as political influence—a good slang term is *clout*. When processes compete for ongoing control of the body, the one with the greatest clout dominates the scene until a process with even greater clout displaces it” (Dennett, 2001, p. 225).

in an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God— is completely solved. This is such a spectacular consequence of the Denial that one is tempted to wonder whether prominent Deniers like Dennett have a secret—if unconscious— religious agenda. They’re certainly not *naturalists*, because they deny the existence of the most certainly known (arguably the only certainly known) general natural fact: the fact of the existence of consciousness.

4. A remark by Democritus is sometimes quoted in support of the Denial. Democritus was a materialist, and he is reported to have said that “There seems to be colour, there seems to be sweetness, there seems to be bitterness. But really there are only atoms and the void” (Democritus c 400 BCE as reported by Galen in the 2nd century CE; see Barnes, 1979, pp. 290-96). The most natural way to take this remark is as the familiar claim that qualities like sweetness and redness are not really properties of objects like strawberries: they’re really just qualities of our subjective conscious experience (which is itself a wholly material phenomenon) of certain properties of strawberries. Understood in this way, Democritus’ remark isn’t any sort of denial of the existence of consciousness. On the contrary: it takes the reality of consciousness for granted and derives all its force from that.

It has nevertheless been taken to be a denial of the existence of consciousness. After all, it comes down to us as the claim that “really there are only atoms and the void”, and nothing else. But even if that way of understanding the remark were right, it wouldn’t follow that Democritus was an early denier, for the quoted passage is only the first half of an imaginary conversation Democritus stages between “The Intellect” and “The Senses”. The Intellect speaks first: “There seems to be colour, there seems to be sweetness, there seems to be bitterness. But really there are only atoms and the void.” But then The Senses reply: “Poor Intellect, do you hope to defeat us while from us you borrow your evidence? Your victory is your defeat.”

The Senses point out that the evidence on which the Intellect draws in making its claim is already enough to prove the falsity of the claim. This is a decisive rejoinder even before one appeals to one of the oldest points in philosophy, the keystone of any genuine naturalism: that the only thing one knows absolutely for certain about concrete reality, about the natural world (apart from the fact that one exists), is that one has conscious experience that has a certain qualitative experiential character.³⁷

37 This section is adapted from Strawson 2017b.

5. The facts are clear: some people deny the existence of consciousness. They deny the existence of the only thing whose existence (along with one's own existence) is absolutely certain. Why do they do it? This is an interesting question. I don't think it's enough to say that they do it because they're convinced materialists, and mistakenly think that the existence of consciousness is incompatible with the truth of materialism. A strange anxiety emanates from many of the Deniers' discussions of consciousness. I suspect that there may be a link between childhood trauma and an inclination to the Denial, but I'm not at all sure about this.

The facts, again, are clear, but the case is not settled. The case is never settled in philosophy. "One soon discovers ... that nothing is noncontroversial. Nothing is ever completely nailed down. Ghosts are never completely laid" (Sellars, 1981, p. 31).

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