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Metacognition: Transparent Claims and Opaque Reality

Will Schreiber-Stainthorp

It's a tricky paradox that, as the mind becomes more advanced, its concomitant increases in complexity limit its capacity for self-comprehension. To make matters worse, it's precisely these more advanced minds that are most susceptible to the delusion of omniscience. This state of affairs culminates in a mind that is intelligent enough to *approach* self-knowledge, but not intelligent enough to realize where it falls short. Luckily, some minds have been able to surmount this particular hurdle and have reached a humbler conception of consciousness. One example of this feat can be seen in Patricia Churchland's *Consciousness: the Transmutation of a Concept*, in which the neuroscientist-cum-philosopher argues that the mind is far too intricate for all of its contents to be available to its owner. The transparency thesis—the belief that every idea, every thought, and every desire is available for conscious analysis through the lens of introspection—may be comforting. The problem, Churchland makes clear, is that such a perspective is far too arrogant and simplistic to be true.

In her attack on the transparency thesis, Churchland doesn't belabor any definition of the term, calling it “the venerable dogma that one's mental life is self-intimating and introspectively available” (Churchland 80). In many ways, her brevity in defining the concept is appropriate: the transparency thesis is so ingrained into popular notions of consciousness that an explicit delineation of its tenets is superfluous. The popularity of the transparency thesis is largely the result of our natural intuitions regarding our mental life. The bulk of our phenomenal consciousness consists of us thinking about the things we *want* to think about. Even when we think about things we *don't* want to think about—when our thoughts seemingly drift of their own accord—we retain awareness of and access to them. We're left with the

sense that, with sufficient introspection, all of our mental processes can be rendered visible.

The issue, though, is that if anything in our mind *were* opaque—that is to say, invisible—we would by definition be unaware of it. Without any awareness of these underlying processes, we'd have no reason to think that mental life wasn't transparent. Perhaps, one might argue, we'd have the feeling that we weren't perceiving something—that there was something there, lurking below the surface. While this is possible, it's made unlikely by another feature of our consciousness: a fundamental egotism. This is arguably an inevitable corollary of consciousness, and it results in a philosophy that's self-centered and self-aggrandizing. The sort of solipsism we're biased towards makes the transparency thesis appealing: if we're all-knowing, all-powerful creatures, of course we should be able to know our own thoughts! However, as Patricia Churchland goes on to show, what's appealing isn't always what's right.

In attacking the transparency thesis, Churchland's central strength—which relates to her background as a hard scientist—is her ability to marshal empirical evidence. This is a refreshing departure in a field that can often seem mired in thought experiments and theoretical postulates. Churchland refers to several studies that suggest we're not conscious of everything that goes on in our minds. For example, our brains produce responses to stimuli of which we're not consciously aware. More sensationally, these unnoticed phenomena are capable of altering our subsequent behavior. One example of this is that people will claim they prefer things to which they've been exposed, even when that exposure is so rapid—on the order of milliseconds—that conscious awareness of it is impossible (Churchland 81). This is important for a couple of reasons. For one, it shows how stimuli can exist and be processed without our conscious awareness. But it also shows that our brain can respond to these stimuli, altering the body's course of action, without us noticing a thing. It's not that there are simply subliminal phenomena in the environment—it's that these phenomena can impact our behavior without us having any idea that we are being affected.

Churchland also shows how stimuli of which we're entirely aware have ramifications we can't appreciate. One example of this is priming, where behavior is subconsciously influenced by environmental stimuli. For example, one study found that giving people hot coffee led them to categorize a person as kinder (i.e., warmer, though that particular word was never given to the subjects in the study) than did a group given iced

coffee (Williams & Bargh, 2008). In this case, both groups of people were aware of the temperature of the beverage they were given, but not of the impact that this seemingly arbitrary variable had on their subsequent behavior. Churchland presents another example with similar significance: without knowing it, humans judge the friendliness of their peers based on the size of their pupils. Again, Churchland illustrates that we can be aware of stimuli without being aware of their effects on us. This is mutually exclusive with the transparency thesis, which argues that the reasons behind our actions are always and entirely accessible.

It's only when we interrupt the processes we're subconsciously dependent on that their importance becomes evident. To show this, Churchland presents the example of blind people who subconsciously rely upon echolocation in order to navigate. These people aren't aware of their dependence on environmental sound, let alone capable of explaining how they use it to navigate. And yet they clearly do: when their ears are plugged to prevent echolocation, they perform measurably worse at navigating. While the introspective accounts of these blind subjects neglected to account for the role of audition in navigation, their minds relied on that very modality. If the mental were fully transparent, such a disparity would never occur: every factor influencing us would be available for conscious consideration.

Another example concerning vision offers additional evidence of the shrouded nature of the mental. Blindsight is the phenomenon wherein people who are self-professedly blind are capable of visual feats—distinguishing a vertical from a horizontal line, for example—that surprise even themselves. The precise mechanism of this ability is less important than what it says about the mind, which is that we have entire abilities of which we're unaware. This strikes yet another blow against the transparency thesis: what could testify more to the fact that the mental is mysterious than the fact that it harbors capabilities of which we're ignorant?

Churchland's reference to blindsight is convincing in the immediate, but upon scrutiny reveals several cracks that offer footholds for critics. For one thing, Churchland is referencing a disorder—something that is by its nature deviant from the norm. When she talks about blindsight, what she's saying is that a diseased brain has the capability to fool itself. To conclude that this says anything about a healthy brain is quite the jump. This is especially striking because

Churchland opens her paper by arguing that non-transparency “is the nature of the case” (Churchland 81). If this were true, it seems odd that she would have to refer to pathologies to prove her point.

Even when Churchland is making points about healthy brains, her conclusions often seem extreme. For example, she claims that the existence of subliminal stimuli that influence behavior is proof that the transparency thesis is false. But perhaps it’s disingenuous to call these influences anything more than reflexes. If that’s the case, then it isn’t surprising that we’d be unaware of these influences: they are simply environmental conditions causing bodily changes. This process is more analogous to something like glycogen breakdown in response to low blood sugar than it is to the mind’s production of thoughts. What this suggests is that Churchland is intentionally inflating the claims of transparency theorists in order to make it easier to dismiss their arguments. A more realistic transparency theorist would argue that only higher-level thoughts, and not basic mental processes, are available through introspection.

Whether or not Churchland’s characterization of the transparency theory is absolutely balanced, the issues she raises with respect to its central tenets are insurmountably problematic. It doesn’t particularly matter whether Churchland relies on examples from pathologies in some of her examples of non-transparent minds, because the rest of her evidence concerns phenomena that affect every human, sick and healthy alike, and indicate that the mind has much more going on than we realize. Further, Churchland might argue that even if we’re aware of all higher-level thoughts, the fact that we’re oblivious to the factors that influence their origin and manifestation indicates that the mental isn’t transparent. In other words, we see the cake but none of the ingredients, so it makes little sense to call ourselves bakers.

Churchland herself acknowledges the surprise involved in countenancing a mind that isn’t fully one’s own. It seems like a paradox: the entity we take to be ‘I’ is our mind, and yet that mind—our entire being—can never fully know itself. But there’s a physical analogue to this problem: David Foster Wallace’s meditative short story *Backbone* describes a boy who attempts to touch every part of his body, only to discover that much of it is inaccessible. Even though that body is his—even though that body is *him*—absolute self-knowledge will always elude him.

The more one looks at the intricacies of the mind, the more this sort of inaccessibility seems inevitable. If only as a matter of

pragmatism, it's not feasible to be consciously aware of every cog in the organ that controls the whole machine. One growing body of research in psychology and neuroscience is that investigating multitasking, and the fact that we only have so many cognitive resources to spread among various tasks. If this is the case—and it certainly appears to be—then it's no surprise that we'd take mental shortcuts, even in our analysis of our own minds.

The transparency thesis is seductive—instinctual, even—but this doesn't mean it's right. If anything, this intrinsic appeal discredits the transparency thesis, as it suggests we'd accept the thesis without much in the way of reason: we don't have to prove it, because we already believe it. Our innate beliefs often merit the most scrutiny, as it's easiest for them to elude skeptical eyes.

It's likely that people will resist Churchland's reasoning and cling to the transparency thesis because the alternative strikes them as disheartening. We think of ourselves as being in charge, as dictating what our brain does. But if much of what it does is hidden, we lose power and agency over the one thing we expect to rule. But Churchland's attitude is a healthier alternative to this view: she doesn't grieve over her loss of control, but instead marvels at a mind that is powerful enough to function in that control's absence. The mind may have aspects that are intractably invisible, but that only makes for a richer, more wonderful picture.

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