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Memory, the Self and Why We Are Conscious (Or alternatively: Why We Don't Do Consciousness)

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Abstract

This paper aims at examining a new assessment of a foundational paradigm for conducting science within the fields of neurology and its corresponding philosophy of mind. The main view examined is that of Alva Noë, professor of philosophy at UC Berkeley, and the view he forwards in his book *Out of Our Heads*. His main thesis rests on a critique of current scientific methodology and the foundational paradigm of functionalism, which he counters with a view from a more radical examination of what consciousness is in terms of living beings in their environments and the processes that animate these living beings. The author of this paper takes some issue with this process ontology that Noë forwards and critiques it based on its own premises and what follows from it, while later contrasting it with a focus on personal memory as Henri Bergson had described them in developing his metaphysical system.

The long-standing assumption in the cognitive and neuro-scientific community has been that consciousness is in some way or other explainable, or even reducible to mechanisms in the brain. The tradition can be more or less traced back to the problem arising in Cartesian dualism and the Mind-Body Problem, which in terms of 20th century science and psychology has found its opponent in materialism, functionalism, behaviorism, etc. What we are left with are the continued attempts to trace our mental states and phenomena to simply explaining how our brain works as an electrochemical machine as well as understanding what the processes are that produce our sensations. In essence, the fundamental question for scientists is (to put it a little over-simplistically): How does our biological computer function?

Notwithstanding the fact that we have to as of yet actually explain how consciousness finally is the sum of all of the processes of our brain, there have traditionally been many rejections to this thesis that at least in the scientific community have not been granted any significant attention. As a thinker skirting the boundaries between philosophy and science, Alva Noë in his book *Out Of Our Heads* attacks this mechanistic paradigm into accepting some of its main assumptions' falsity and incoherence. As I will explain further in the following, Noë argues that, because of the artificiality of the assumptions made in trying to explain consciousness through mechanical processes in the body, particularly in the brain, we are ignoring a central feature of our conscious lives, mainly our experience of the world and fundamentally the quality of consciousness. To use his example, consciousness must be understood as something like money. Money is intrinsically not monetarily valuable, but rather this value is an attribute acquired through its meaning in our use. So consciousness is, like money, something resulting out of the way we interact and enact our lives.

One consideration that has to be made here, is that what happens to the Self is fundamental. I will argue that, short from disappearing, Noë's conception of Self will boil down to making the world the subject of all experience. Considering our relationship as subjects to our memories, Henri Bergson, although not particularly explicit on what the Self is, does offer a systematized view of what experience is and what memory is; a view that eventually will prove more logically coherent and at odds with what Noë offers us in his thesis. Using *Matter and Memory*, I will argue that on the logical evidence we have of what memory must be from a metaphysical standpoint, we have to reevaluate what our assumptions about consciousness are and what the consequences for envisioning what the Self is.

By the end of my argument, we will need to reexamine with what validity we make the judgment that all states of consciousness, even consciousness itself, is reducible to a set of organs in our body.

Noë begins his book *Out Of Our Heads* by examining what he calls "An Astonishing Hypothesis," namely that our consciousness is in fact reducible to our brain and its processes. This view implies that of explaining consciousness in effect not something that any philosopher has any say in, but is a question that only science and empirical investigation can solve by fully understanding what the nerve cells in our brain are doing. What Noë points out that this hypothesis, which is the foundation for Nobel Prize winning research like Hubel and Wiesel's (Noë, 149), is false and completely unfounded. However, this basic framework currently services both philosophy and the empirical investigation that these scientists are engaged in. Such a foundation rests on the fact that "we can produce experience by direct stimulation of the brain" (173) and by acknowledging the fact that we dream, we must also acknowledge that "we are not actively exploring the world or dynamically interacting with it" (177) and thus the experience must be produced solely by the brain.

What Noë looks to disprove in this singular view of what the human mind is, is that in order for any being to be called conscious, it cannot solely be explained through understanding mechanistic processes of primarily one bodily organ. In fact, it must be explained by examining how the human body as a whole interacts with the rest of its environment. Of course, the brain is a vital part in the functioning of a body with its environment, but it is not the sole factor that determines whether or not a being has consciousness, i.e. a mind. In fact the whole notion of a being "having" consciousness is somewhat of a misstatement, since we can only attribute this characteristic to a being that is interacting with its environment. Once we have understood this argument completely, we understand that the brain never could produce anything close to a mental experience.

A brain on its own is not conscious of anything since it would need the larger nervous system; the body and finally the world for the brain to even be alive as a first premise, before it could even begin to be conscious. Methodologically, the instruments with which this research is conducted, reveal very little as to how the brain functions, with fMRI and PET scans showing approximations of what is actually happening in the brain, with regions in the brain not being so distinct as medical science wants to think they are. So the models of the brain that we have are sketchy at best, and furthermore, however "clinical" the settings may be for experimentation, they still ignore for the most part the kind of interaction that the brain has with its environment. What particular brain-state should be taken as the T=0 value, which acts as the baseline with which to measure all other activity? From the standpoint of the physical sciences, one would take the point of rest as this base value. However, determining what a brain at rest looks like is completely impossible: "But how do we decide what the brain at rest looks

like? After all, the brain is never at rest. For example, there are stages of sleep when your brain is working harder than it does at most times during the day!” (21).

To contrast this skepticism, Noë believes that there are scientific discoveries to be made, but these have to be made considering one fundamental aspect of consciousness: “It is something that we do, actively, in our dynamic interaction with the world around us” (24), and that this is something that we can observe to an extent in the feedback mechanisms that operate in our brain; the brain operates not on a one-directional basis of the senses receiving stimuli that are communicated to the brain to be processed, “neural activity is characterized by loops and two-directionality” (22). For the world at large, our consciousness then becomes something that interacts with it on a fundamental basis, as opposed to what neuroscientists would call the “Creator-Brain” (129) view of the mind as an organ that reconstructs reality out of unintelligible sense-data in order to make it intelligible. Our perceptual organs, like our eyes, receive stimuli that are in no way intelligible as our common everyday experience, but are then adjusted and interpreted in the brain so we can actually interact with the objects that we perceive.

However, this is not how we actually experience the world, since that would mean that we actually see more than what we perceive, having to construct a unified field of experience out of an infinite amount of data that as parts in themselves are unintelligible. What we understand from cognitive science experiments concerning vision is that we see only what is important to us. Consequentially, we see less than what is actually given to us in our perceptual field. This leads Noë to claim that the details of our perceptual experience can in no way be explained through conventional neuroscience (as these restore the fallacious notion of the homunculus interpreting sense-datum). Therefore perception cannot simply be in the brain, but must reside in the objects, within the world. What we as conscious agents do, with varying degree of skill and mastery, is to use these details in the world in a practical way that inextricably involves us within the world we live in.

In the second chapter “Conscious Life,” Noë gives varied examples from our world, all more or less familiar, of cases where we all would necessarily have to attribute consciousness to the being in question, solely based on the fact that the being has a relationship to the world based on dynamic interaction and a unity that goes beyond merely explaining what the mechanistic processes are of the interaction in question. This is shown in the way in which the consciousness of a young child is nurtured by the structure of its environment and its proximity to its parent. This already establishes that humans, first and foremost, are not observers of any kind where the intentionality of consciousness is aimed at asserting some kind abstraction of what they perceive, but that their consciousness is actively in communication with phenomena themselves. In no other way could infants, who clearly do not have a fully developed mind by human standards, actually interact successfully with the world.

The significant point that Noë establishes here, is that the question of consciousness is not a question about justifying its attribution to agents, but a moral question about what we recognize as being alive on a basic fundamental level and how we are to interact with such living and organic systems. This is a moral question, even restricted to the human case, because if we ask about the consciousness of any given person, it is not a question of proving on objective grounds how we can account for the consciousness, but a question of determining our relationship as an agent to said person. In this way, however, we have to acknowledge consciousness in every living thing, be it as simple as a bacterium. Once a being is actively engaged in the world, once we can attribute agency, the fact that a being

pursues certain interests, to an organism, we must also attribute some form of rudimentary consciousness to it.

Now, actually localizing anything close to a brain in a bacterium would not only be impossible, but irrational and absurd to the extreme. If we are to say that a single-celled organism has some kind of rudimentary consciousness, i.e. the quality that we attribute to things that are aware and decide their actions, then we must grant that consciousness is not a quality produced by the brain. The brain thinks just as little as we would say a computer thinks: Not at all.

What the case of the bacterium illustrates is that consciousness is a process of interactions between what *could* be called an agent and its environment. To phrase this in Merleau-Ponty's language, we are "empty heads turned to the world;" consciousness is not a quality of any one thing that can be traced to a substance, material or other, but the fundamental characteristic of life. This solves the problem of trying to account for consciousness in the brain, but it leaves other questions open due to the consequences that this has for what we attribute consciousness to.

I think that this is not an exaggeration; if we are to take Noë's vision of what consciousness is fundamentally, then we have to consider the universe itself as conscious. Noë doesn't explicitly say this, but he does frame our process of interacting with the world as relating to the "brain, body and world" (95), which answers two fundamental questions: "Where do we find ourselves" (68) and "Where do you stop?" (93). The mind is both extended and distributed; the brain is just as unconscious as a musical instrument does not play music by itself: both are vehicles for a specific activity. What Noë is counteracting here is not just a materialist envisioning of how mind functions, but radically that 'mind' is not anything substantial in itself.

Taking this seriously would mean we must consider the application of consciousness to things that we do not ordinarily consider to be conscious. But how do we do evident distinctions if we are willing to go down to that level of dynamic interactions?

Thermogenic reactions, like elemental sodium interacting with water producing heat (in this case an extreme amount of heat manifested as an explosion), do not understand themselves in terms of conscious awareness of deciding to act; just as little as bacteria understand their intentions and needs, neither do basic chemical interactions understand anything. Criteria that we would then need in order to distinguish the consciousness of a bacterium from a chemical process would be that of a subject (i.e. the pole at which one can demarcate the origin of a sequence of actions) interacting with the world, as in the bacterium with its environment. But if we can only define the subject by the process that it undergoes with the parts of its environment that are removed from it, then it would be conceivable that either the water or the sodium could be termed the subjects in the processes that it undergoes involving conscious but not cognitive action with the world around it. Be it that the field of perception of the water or the sodium would be restricted to the molecules that are the constituents of these, our field of perception of the world is only related to whatever processes we can possibly interact with. For humans this means that it is purpose related and willful, but with a bacterium that doesn't understand its own processes, this is a passive 'interaction' with conscious awareness. A chemical reaction is passive as well, and yet usually we do not attribute consciousness to non-living processes. And if we cannot base consciousness on activity or passivity in the interaction, since perception is relative to the possible interactions and

processes, then it wouldn't be too far of a stretch to attribute consciousness to objects like tables, chairs et al. provided that they enter into some kind of relation with other things and processes do not act though. However, this is slightly absurd.

It seems that the goal Noë set out to accomplish with his book, in redefining consciousness as something we do and not simply as a spatio-temporally isolated function, ends up folding in on itself. In his words, consciousness isn't like digestion. A bacterium may do a lot of things that are in some sense comparable to our processes, but they have not even the slightest inkling of what their intentions are (if there really are intentions as we would call them in bacteria). Their processes are just as blind as digestion in our entrails, electrochemical reactions in our brain or even breathing. But we do not conventionally attribute consciousness to any three of these processes, although they can be narrowed down in terms of their respective processes to unities interacting with constantly changing environments and/or conditions. This obscures the matter more than illuminates things, because we are no closer to understanding what the prerequisite is for consciousness itself. Noë makes a strong point in relating consciousness to life, but life is not simply something that relates to processes in the world. Rather than being reductivist in a substantial materialist framework, we are seeking to find life in the processes that surround us. Yet we do not know anything that is not always engaged in some kind of process. The universe as we know it does not allow for parts that do not interact with each other.

Another problem that arises with this kind of process-oriented ontology is that we cannot account for Memory in a way that would make sense in the way that we conventionally do. Although Noë acknowledges that in explaining consciousness, we need to account for it contextually and historically. But the fact that we account for things in terms of processes and relative presence, we are only accounting for the future on two out of three levels of time. Noë discusses habits and habituation as a fundamental quality of conscious beings and thus makes past experience important insofar as we must account for the formation of habits that may not have been present at first and then become integrated into our functioning of the consciousness. But in our common experience we make a difference between genuine memories and routine habits. Furthermore, what we term as 'memories' are clearly something, not present any more, at least in a presentist process-ontology (if we want to uphold some aspect of memory as being different than habit) where our consciousness is about the present and moves towards the future, the past being the stepping stones to get to the present we are now in and moving further into the future. What is important to distinguish here is that for memories to be anything more than habits, they must also involve a Self, both as a rememberer and as the referential point, which doesn't have room in a process-oriented view of consciousness.

The problem is now how we are to bring make consciousness have access both to perceiving images and to representations of past images that also have the power to influence action, which creates indeterminacy and freedom, by virtue of their being virtual and not bound by the laws of nature that govern images. This also means that we have removed past experience from the realm of perception, which we can understand in relation to humans as being different from the sensations that we are conscious of in terms of our perception of the world around us. What this means in relation to Noë is that for consciousness to be something only related to action, we must make recollection impossible, since memory is divorced from any action, unless we want to call it something that the brain does. The brain is however not conscious, and thus does not "do" anything, at least in terms of what Noë would call consciousness and action. And recollection cannot constitute habit for the same criteria, since habit

is always enacted and as much a part of the present as any other motor mechanism that only needs to be set in motion. Furthermore, as Bergson articulates in his article “Memory of the Present and False Recognition,” in order for recollection to function in any way relevant to perception, we would understand our recollections objectively without the same continuity of motion that we associate to images. However, we bring something to the present, which is already past, and we divide something continuous into parts relevant to our present situation. If this is part of our faculties of mind, that we can consciously bring to the present our past, then consciousness makes action metaphysically possible, but is in no way an attribute of it, as Noë would have it.

So for consciousness to be something of relevance to any field of study, it must act as a kind of mediator between past psychical states and the present psychical and material state. Consciousness “in a being with bodily functions ... preside[s] over action and enlightens choice” while at the same time, “it throws light on the immediate antecedents of the decision, and on those past recollections which can usefully combine with it” (141). So, although Bergson erects a dualism in a way like Descartes does, this dualism is only apparent, since life is fundamentally geared towards action, and the differences in kind between memory and perceptions are resolved in a way that permit the existence of life, that is also creative and has free will.

Memory must intervene in matter if we are to understand metaphysically where the manifestations originate. If we can thus bridge the divide between both, we can actually create a ground on which to conduct a study of what is consciousness and how it makes way for action. In humans, this can fundamentally only be understood if we can take our bodies as *hyphens*, by which the intersection between memory and the field of perception can interact with enough tension to manifest all of the virtual actions that we experience and enact as actual. Thus our consciousness as humans needs to develop general ideas, which are “unceasingly going backwards and forwards between the plane of action and that of pure memory” (161), in order for purposeful and free action to crystallize itself into actuality.*

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