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Transcendence

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Abstract

James Tartaglia in his book *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* advances what he calls ‘The Transcendent Hypothesis’ as a solution to the problem of consciousness. The present paper examines T’s solution in light of his definition of ‘transcendence’, offers several criticisms of the solution, and briefly, indicates a conception of consciousness on which the problem does not arise.

1.

James Tartaglia’s *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* is a book wide in scope and bristling with ideas. We shall mainly focus on just one, viz., his application of the concept of transcendence to the problem of consciousness. The problem, as he presents it, should be familiar to philosophers; his proposal for solving it, however, is novel (at least I have never encountered it before).

The problem, very roughly, might be stated as follows: whereas the existence of consciousness (or experience) cannot be denied, it is not obvious what exactly consciousness is.

Thus, as T explains, identifying it with something going on in the brain or anywhere else in the natural world (which T often refers to as ‘objective reality’) – a view to which many contemporary philosophers have subscribed – seems, at least in some respects, to clash with our everyday conception of consciousness, and in that sense to be what T calls a ‘revisionist’ view of the matter. Thus, e.g., things might be arranged so that you could catch a glimpse of what is going on in your brain right now. Does it seem right that the activity (in that pulpy, convoluted mass) of which you are, via a mirror, say, visually aware might be your consciousness? You can point to the activity. Can you point to your consciousness?

But if it is not something going on in your brain, what *else* might your consciousness be? Traditionally, some philosophers have appealed to a view of reality as including not just what T calls objective reality (the natural world) but

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a discrete, further reality, which is essentially spaceless and hence radically different from objective reality (the Cartesian soul). Yet this raises the awkward question of how, in that case, our consciousness might, as it certainly seems to, arise causally out of – and in turn may cause – events which belong to the physiological make-up of the human beings we are and thus are part of objective reality; not to speak of the fact that the idea of such a further reality seems foreign to any conception of reality which respects modern science.

2.

Such, then, is the problem of consciousness. We cannot deny the existence of consciousness or experience; yet there seems to be nothing which it might be. There have been, since Descartes, countless suggestions for solving the problem. T's solution turns around the concept of transcendence.

T's solution, if I understand it correctly, is very simple. Consciousness, whatever exactly it is, is a kind of activity or state or event – that is, a kind of phenomenon – that occurs on the part of (let us suppose) a human subject. The problem, once again, is that consciousness cannot be identified with any phenomenon that is part either of objective reality or a supposed (spaceless) addendum to this reality; hence, while it is undeniable that there is such a thing as consciousness, there seems to be nothing that it might be. T's solution (he calls it the 'Transcendent Hypothesis') is that, in trying to locate consciousness either, on the one hand, in objective reality or, on the other, in the Cartesian addendum to this, we overlook the further possibility that it might be part of what T describes as a 'transcendent' reality – which, he maintains, is where consciousness should be located (PML, p. 104).

3.

Of course, everything hangs on what is meant here by 'transcendent reality'. What, e.g., is the difference between the reality that is objective and that which is transcendent? If we assume the former is that of which we are perceptually aware and which spreads out (endlessly) around us now in space and time, then what might the latter be?

T distinguishes two senses of 'transcendent'. On the first, one reality transcends another for the simple reason that it is a different reality (or perhaps

we should say, kind of reality) from the other. On this sense, however, the Cartesian addendum would ‘transcend’ the objective world. So far from solving the problem of consciousness, this is part of the picture which gives rise to the problem.

On the second sense, the fact that one reality transcends another – this would be at least a necessary versus sufficient condition – entails that entities belonging to these realities, though spatio-temporal, have no spatial or temporal relation to each other. Thus, no matter how long and in what direction I travel away from the point I currently occupy, I could never get ‘closer to’ or ‘further from’ an entity that belongs to a transcendent reality (Valberg 2007).

Now, although T does not explicitly characterize transcendence in this way, it seems to capture what he has in mind. Thus he says that the ‘only concrete model of transcendence we have ... [is one in which entities in the transcending reality] stand to the objective world as the objective world stands to [the world of] a dream’ (PML, p. 103). There are, in fact, aspects of T’s view of the dream/reality contrast to which I would take exception; but these do not affect our present discussion. Let us therefore agree to take this contrast as our model for understanding transcendence.

According to T, the key to solving the problem of consciousness lies in what he calls the ‘Transcendent Hypothesis (TH)’. The TH says that, e.g., my present consciousness belongs neither to objective reality nor its Cartesian addendum, but to a transcendent reality: a reality that stands to the objective world (the reality I take to include both myself and the objects spreading out endlessly around me) in the way that, if this were a dream, the objects and phenomena belonging to the reality outside the dream would transcend the world that spreads out around me.

The TH, if correct, seems to solve the problem of consciousness. But problems, or questions, arise. We shall mention three.

4.

If consciousness belongs neither to objective reality nor its Cartesian addendum, we are, as T maintains, required neither to accept the kind of revisionism that identifies consciousness with phenomena in the brain nor to grapple with the supposed conundrum of how consciousness and these phenomena might causally interact. Indeed, if consciousness belongs to a transcendent reality, there is – there *can be* – no question of any such identification

or interaction.

But is it not a well-known fact, a commonplace, that what transpires in the brain affects how things are from within consciousness or experience – that, e.g., taking certain drugs (which act on the brain) may affect our perception of colour, that brain damage can radically alter the way objects appear?

The point is not lost on T. But he thinks that such commonplace beliefs are the result of a mistake, viz., of our misinterpreting consciousness or experience, which is a transcendent reality, as ‘both part of the objective world and a subjective entity, in order to interpret it as indirect awareness of an objective world (PML, p. 112).’ I am not sure I understand this, or, indeed, why we should have the aim of interpreting consciousness as an indirect awareness etc. Or, if it is not meant to be an ‘aim’, why suppose that we place such a convoluted and (no doubt) misguided construction on things when all we *seem* to be doing is – in our habitual inductivist way – ascribing a causal connection on the basis of an observed succession of phenomena (e.g., taking drugs and an alteration in the way objects look to us)? Of course, such everyday inductive leaps may prove ill-founded; but it seems implausible to suppose they involve the kind of philosophical misinterpretation contemplated by T.

5.

Another difficulty is this. On T’s view, my present consciousness (call it ‘C’) belongs to a transcendent reality – but I misinterpret C (as being both part of objective reality and subjective.) The difficulty is that, in order for me to misinterpret C, that is, to take it to have properties it does (or could) not have, I would first have to single out C referentially. Yet if C belongs to a transcendent reality, this is not possible. The possibility of misinterpreting an entity E presupposes a kind of referential contact with E that is necessarily absent in the case where E is a transcendent entity.

I can, unproblematically, refer to entities and phenomena in, say, my dream of last night. But then, although the world of which I am a part transcends the world of the dream, I have access in memory to the world of the dream. However, if this, right now, were a dream, I would not have access to the world that would presumably stand outside this. Do I have memories of it? Can I see or touch etc. entities in that transcendent reality? If this were a dream, the reality that transcends the dream would be, for me, nothing more than ‘something’ that exists

or is there – ‘something’ into which I might emerge.

In that case, it is not clear how I might, in thought, single out for reference the entities – the objects and phenomena – that comprise the supposedly transcendent reality. On the dream hypothesis, there would be such a reality, but the entities by which it is comprised would be, for me, outside referential reach. They would not be entities about which I might form either a correct or an incorrect interpretation.

6.

The last problem we shall mention concerns the role of the dream hypothesis in T’s argument. I may toy with the dream hypothesis, but in fact I believe this is not a dream: the world around me is the real world, not a dream world. T, I take it, would assert the same with respect to his own case. However, his conception of a transcendent reality requires (I hope I have him right here) that this is a dream.

Thus, as we noted earlier, he says our only model for understanding transcendence is one in which entities in the transcending reality stand to the objective world as the objective world stands to [the world of] a dream. So, if I am to take seriously the idea that my present consciousness belongs to a transcendent reality, I must assume that this is a dream. But, it seems, that is just what I cannot assume, since, once again, I believe this is reality.

This has an awkward consequence. On T’s view, my consciousness is part of transcendent reality. If (as I believe) this is not a dream, there is no transcendent reality. And my consciousness? It seems that, on T’s view, not only that it is part neither of objective reality or its Cartesian addendum, but that there is no such thing as my consciousness.

7.

Yet I agree with T’s basic negative point that consciousness is part neither of (what he calls) objective reality or its Cartesian addendum. I also agree that it is therefore a mistake to conceive of consciousness as some kind of phenomenon (state or process or activity etc.) occurring in our heads or souls. The alternative, I suggest, involves not that consciousness is transcendent, but that it is, as I might put it, horizontal.

The familiar debate in current philosophy about consciousness or experience assumes that it is something which occurs or goes on in us – that it is a

phenomenon – the main issue being whether it occurs in our brains (the more popular view) or in our souls (the view to be avoided). And there is no denying that we at least sometimes conceive of consciousness (experience) in this way. Thus, e.g., if you observe me looking at my hand, you might think that light rays reflected from my hand are striking my eyes and initiating a complex string of phenomena whose upshot is yet another phenomenon occurring in me, viz., my visual experience or consciousness of my hand.

But suppose you adopt toward my consciousness the first-person perspective, and consider how things are for me in looking at my hand. I think: ‘Here is my hand, present within my consciousness (experience).’ In this case, it seems nonsense to regard the term ‘consciousness’ as referring to something that is going on in me, a phenomenon. (What would it be for my hand to be present in something going on in me?) Here, rather, ‘consciousness (experience)’ refers to *that from within which* my hand is present, not to a phenomenon but to a horizon.

OK. I have developed this idea at length elsewhere. Suffice it to say, the two conceptions of consciousness – as a phenomenon and as a horizon – are radically different. As we said, it is the phenomenal conception that philosophers assume when they argue about whether consciousness can be identified with phenomena in the brain. In this debate, the horizontal conception of consciousness remains in the background. On the horizontal conception, consciousness (experience) is part neither of the brain or the soul; it is neither material nor ethereal. It is in a sense nothing, that is, nothing in itself: nothing apart from there being something given or present from within it.

8.

T, as we noted, claims that our conception of consciousness or experience in terms of states (and more generally, phenomena), is the result of a confusion. This seems to me right – although, as I said (Section 4), I do not understand T’s diagnosis of the confusion.

As I see it, the confusion consists in running together our conception of consciousness as something which occurs in our heads, hence as a phenomenon of some kind, with that of the horizon from within which the world is present to us. On the horizontal conception, consciousness, so far from being a phenomenon, is in a real sense nothing: it is nothing apart from something being given from within it; nothing, that is, in itself. The confused amalgamation of these two ideas

issues in the problematic conception of something which is both a phenomenon and yet somehow less than that – a shadowy or ethereal phenomenon.

There are, indeed, relevant phenomena on our part, viz., the events and processes, and so on, which occur in our brains and nervous systems. Consciousness does not consist of, but is caused by, such phenomena. Then what is consciousness – a further, shadowy phenomenon? Have we not omitted consciousness from our picture?

What has been omitted is not a phenomenon but a fact. When, say, I look at my hand, various things happen in the world, including the part of the world (the human being) that I am: light waves reflect from my hand to my eyes, the optic nerve is stimulated, impulses are transmitted to my brain, and so on. The upshot is not a further perhaps shadowy phenomenon but a fact, viz., the fact that my hand is there, visually present from within my consciousness.

Consciousness figures here not as something that occurs inside my head, hence as a phenomenon, but as the horizon within which the fact of presence holds. Suppose the fact in question were the fact, say, that a flash of lightning is present to me. The flash would be a phenomenon. However, the consciousness from within which the fact of the flash's presence holds would not be another phenomenon. Would there be *two* phenomena – one outside my head (the flash) and the other inside my head (my consciousness of the flash)? There would be just one, the flash, the fact of whose presence holds from within the horizon of my consciousness.

9.

Of course, as we said, there are things going on inside my head, viz., the events (phenomena) in my brain which are – or so we may suppose – responsible not just for whatever facts of presence hold from within my consciousness but for the fact that there is such a thing as my consciousness from within such facts hold. Thus each of us knows that when this activity ceases (which one day it will), then that will be it: there will be just nothing.

References

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