

RORTY AND THE PROBLEM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract

This paper is written as if it were a paper by Rorty that was commissioned for this volume. 'Rorty' begins by expressing his historicist doubts about the concept of the volume, namely that of seeking insight into the 'hard' problem of consciousness from philosophers belonging to different historical periods and cultures. He explains his view that the problem in question is an unfortunate, outdated and counterproductive accident of history, which is best ignored. He says that the Rylean tradition in philosophy taught us how to not 'take consciousness seriously', and portrays those who disagree as trying, albeit very ineffectually, to hold back progress – largely because they are influenced by religious instincts which they fail to recognise. He concludes by berating the concept of the volume once more.

'Consciousness and the Great Philosophers: What would *they* have made of *our* mind-body problem?' That is the title this volume bears, and it is just about as wrong-headed as it could have been. The only saving grace is the reference to 'our' mind-body problem, which shows a modicum of historical circumspection. It shows some awareness that *our* mind-body problem – by which the editors mean those scholastic little debates about ineffable thingamajigs called 'qualia' currently taking place in certain analytic philosophy departments and the journals that service them – might not be the same as what previous generations have called 'the mind-body problem'. However this awareness was apparently not enough to induce second thoughts about hoisting this 'problem' on the 'Great Philosophers' of the past, and then asking a selection of today's philosophers to say something about it on their behalf.

With one hand, the problem is historicised; but with the other it is eternalized – as one of the grand old problems that anyone deserving the title ‘Great Philosopher’ ought to have had something interesting to say about. The thought seems to be that although the formulation has changed somewhat, nevertheless *the* problem of consciousness – suitably sharpened up as it is within today’s state-of-the-art debates – is something that has always been with us in some shape or form. The mind-body problem, like the other grand old problems, has an ahistorical essence, and – thank God – we are now closer to it than ever before. What a marvellous idea, then, to provide our hallowed forbears a platform from which to pat us on the backs; and if they chide us a little too, then all the better, for those wise old foxes may still have something to teach us. With their help, perhaps we can solve it once and for all!

The essentialism and ahistoricism this project embraces, is coupled with both a Whiggish pride in ‘our’ formulation of ‘the problem’, and a Great Man theory of the history of philosophy. But most of the Great Philosophers included here were not so great. They were simply compilers of ideas that were in the air at the time, and their ‘greatness’ consists mainly in being lucky enough to find their way into doxographic histories of philosophy compiled by nineteenth-century Kantians – the kind that begin with Thales. These histories managed to entrench Kant’s externalization of the intellectual scene of the eighteenth century, by persuading subsequent generations that there are perennial and specifically philosophical problems requiring a distinct academic discipline to service them. Thus persuaded, an institutional niche arose in which unimaginative professors could bore each other with the minutiae of problems with no relevance to wider culture. Within that niche today, it would be unthinkable to exclude Descartes from a volume of this kind; though Petrus Ramus was his more original source. But the niche is not as immune to history as it likes to think itself, because it would once have been unthinkable to exclude Malebranche;

and he did not get an entry. This lack of immunity is demonstrated most clearly by the absurd decision, inspired by our multi-cultural times, to include non-Western thinkers and call them ‘philosophers’. But the cultural milieu which led ancient Indian and Chinese writers to say the funny-sounding things they said is unfathomable to us. You can *force* their words to relate to ‘our problem’, of course; as Wittgenstein said, if you use enough wrapping paper, you can make things whatever shape you like. But the result will be as artificial as it is unedifying. Philosophy is a Western tradition; it must be, because Kant invented it.

‘Our’ problem is so colloquial, in fact, that you are only likely to take it seriously if you studied in a department of analytic philosophy influenced by David Chalmers, rather than one influenced by Daniel Dennett; if you received the latter formative influence, then you will quite rightly regard it as an embarrassing reminder of a past in which philosophy tried to hold back the tide of science. For this particular problem is merely the residual debris of a long and sorry story which began when the Greeks, surrounded by their prodigious achievements in art, literature and politics, began to wonder why human beings were so special. What, they wondered, was the magical ingredient which made them capable of such glorious things, and thereby raised them above the level of the brutes? They found what they were looking for with an innovative notion of *mind*, which they started to think of as a supernatural faculty capable of soaring above mundane affairs to glimpse the higher things, like the universal truths of geometry; one of the achievements their intellectuals took most pride in. By utilizing this faculty, then, they supposed that we could look beyond lines roughly drawn in the sand, for the purposes of illustrating geometrical propositions, and focus instead on the eternal truths, insulated from time and chance, which those imperfect lines were simply reminders of. This idea of an ability to gaze on the higher things with our immaterial mind’s eye, while turning it away from the grosser things which our material eyes inform us about, resonated

with the Greek temperament well enough to convince them that this story provided a worthy account of their dignity.

It subsequently resonated with the Christian and Islamic worlds too, where the dominant desire, among the pious elite at least, was to fix the mind's eye upon God to the exclusion of all else. But as theocratic power waned, with the improvements in living standards delivered by the rediscovery of more pragmatic Greek and Roman innovations – namely science, technology and democracy – the stage was set for a revolution in the concept of mind which created 'our' problem of consciousness. For the science of Galileo persuaded a new generation that if they turned their mind's eye downwards from God to the nature of His creation, they might not only discover a great deal more about His mind, but also ways to improve our material lot on earth; the latter soon got the upper hand, such that it started to seem that the material world was no longer something to be shunned and nobly endured, but rather something we must force to yield its secrets, in order that we might transform it into something better suited to our mortal needs.

This pragmatic and scientific turn was a good thing; but it was unfortunately accompanied by a reactionary, rearguard action, the tiny ripples of which still preoccupy volumes such as this one. For 'Descartes' (we may as well use the conventional place-holder for intellectuals of the time who still had one foot stuck in the Scholastic mud) was concerned that the new science, which portrayed the world as a vast web of mathematically specifiable relationships, had done away with the *intrinsic nature of reality*. Heavens forbid! Unfortunately he lacked the vision to welcome this as one of the best possible outcomes of the refreshingly mechanistic thinking which Democritus and Epicurus had initiated, and which Galileo had now made credible. For the intrinsic nature of reality, apart from human concerns and

interests, was always just another one of the obsequious names of God. If Descartes had simply bidden good riddance to intrinsicity, we might have had a complete Enlightenment, rather than the half-finished job we inherited. As it was, however, he thought we needed something more solid than a web of relationships which we redescribe from generation to generation; he thought we needed an intrinsic nature that cannot be redescribed, since it transcends the human perspective in order to guide us to its own preferred self-descriptions – like an ethereal father-figure watching over us, and chastising us when we make mistakes. So due to a failure of nerve, and the religious longing that fed it, Descartes saved intrinsicity from science by housing it in the mind.

Sensations, which we share with the brutes, and hence were of little relevance to Greek concerns with dignity, were now moved upwards from the physical world – where they had hitherto been happily residing – to join thoughts in the mind. They were reconceived as hypostatized universals – as the intrinsic greenness of a sensation of a green leaf, or the intrinsic painfulness of a pain – living in perfect harmony with the perfect circularity which only immaterial thought can grasp. Philosophers now call these specifically sensory hypostatized universals ‘qualia’, and wonder how they can be fitted into the physical world. The simple answer is that they cannot, because they were *designed* to transcend the physical world. We have about as much chance of finding them there as of finding a perfect circle, and for the same reason; namely that the physical world contains relations of resemblance, not the universals Plato invented as perfect exemplars of these resemblances. Nevertheless, Descartes managed to hitch sensations and thoughts together by intuiting that some thoughts, like $2+2=4$, are just as indubitable as sensations like pain. The reason was not the same, however. Simple mathematical truths seem indubitable because we have never found reason to develop conversational alternatives; while sincere first-person reports of sensations seem indubitable

because of the useful linguistic practice of treating reports of our own internal states as incorrigible. Nevertheless, this accidental coalescence was enough to persuade Descartes of what he wanted to persuade himself of, namely that intentional and phenomenal states were equally mental, as opposed to physical. The result was the conscious mind.

This concept is a blur that has always been more trouble than it was worth. For it inherits an aura of moral significance from the Greeks, while having been invested with epistemological significance by the moderns, who made conscious sensations our first point of epistemic contact with the physical world. These two elements of the blur fuelled metaphysical resistance to the thoroughly anti-metaphysical materialism that was sweeping Europe. The sceptical potential of a conscious mind ontologically isolated from the physical world led to metaphysical pictures of the world expressly designed to assure us that knowledge is possible. Soon the German Idealists, who shared this concern with earlier rationalists and empiricists, followed Kant's attempt to undo the *real* Copernican revolution, by building metaphysical systems which placed the mind at the centre of reality, in the hope of reasserting our moral dignity in the face of materialism; which they assumed threatened it. But by the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, the game was up. For materialism triumphed when it explained our place in nature to be that of animals blindly evolved from the primordial swamp. After that, the alternative metaphysical visions offered by philosophers could never again be considered anything more than reactionary guff; and metaphysics rapidly faded into the cultural obscurity it finds itself in today.

We should be glad of this development. For our dignity never resided in our possession of a scientifically impenetrable inner life, but rather in our ability to describe and redescribe the world as suits us best. We can describe ourselves as machines and welcome robots into our

moral community; or we can choose to do otherwise if those descriptions prove more trouble than they are worth. Our inviolate uniqueness consists in our ability to say obscure and visionary things which our ancestors never dreamt of; not in the ability to say obvious things to ourselves alone. Even if the secret police could predict the poet's every utterance using cerebrosopes, they would still not understand him; his secret would remain in his heart. The threat to our dignity is posed not by materialism, but by *intrinsicity*; the pernicious idea that there is a true nature of reality which limits our freedom of description – by forcing us to bend our knees in its awesome, non-human presence. Consciousness is the last bastion of intrinsicity, and so it is consciousness, rather than materialism, which threatens our dignity. It is not much of a threat anymore, however, since after the triumph of materialism, when intrinsicity was forced into the invisible stronghold of the conscious mind, the only reverence it still receives takes place in sparsely populated philosophy seminar rooms.

But all philosophy should not be tarred with the same brush, simply because there remains a community of outmoded philosophers who, pushed around by historical forces they do not understand, cannot bring themselves to give up on 'qualia'; and so pay them the homage they deserve with daffy metaphysical systems such as panpsychism, protopanpsychism, protopanphysicophenomenal unionism, or whatever. Or because Thomas Nagel, who unhelpfully stirred this kind of thing up again back in the 1970s, just when it seemed to have died a decent death, thinks that qualia show that 'the materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly wrong' (Nagel 2012). For although analytic philosophy has very little to be proud of, it did nevertheless do our culture at least one service during the twentieth century – by showing that *we do not have to take consciousness seriously*. This agenda, which gave philosophers the notion of 'philosophy of mind' as a distinct area of inquiry, began with one great book, Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949), and reached its

culmination with another, Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (1991). As might be expected, a lot of ink was wasted in the interim, as behaviourists, identity theorists, functionalists and eliminative materialists, all of whom had precious little to disagree about, managed it nonetheless. But the positive result was that the reasons philosophers had thought they needed to take consciousness seriously were systematically dismantled. Its supposedly special features, we learnt, were not in the least recalcitrant to materialist explanation.

We learnt that our supposed privileged access to essentially private inner states was just our ability to respond to conditions within our own bodies with non-inferential reports; the making of such reports is no different in principle from the ability of a thermometer to register the temperature, since both require only causal sensitivity to some particular feature of the environment. What we are reporting on is private only in the sense that, being beneath the skin, it cannot be seen without special equipment; there is no tip-off to a special subjective essence here. And such reports are incorrigible, not because the person making the report cannot be wrong – since they are reporting a pure subjective appearance for which, trivially, no appearance / reality distinction can be made – but rather because in the absence of portable cerebroscopes which can immediately scan a person's brain to convert complex information about neurophysiology into language we can understand, we have found that relying on other people's first-person reports is more reliable than our only alternative, namely predicting their internal states from visible behaviour. As such, we *treat* such reports as incorrigible; we give them a conversational compliment for paying their way.

The supposed privacy and indubitability of consciousness were thereby revealed, by the Rylean tradition, as simply useful ways of talking which philosophers had forcibly co-opted to satisfy their religious yearning for intrinsicity. Inner nuggets of conscious sensation

caused by the outside world do not ground our knowledge, as the empiricist tradition had thought, for as Wittgenstein's private language argument conclusively showed, words like 'pain' acquire their meaning in the public domain. When philosophers treat 'pain' as the name of something whose presence swings free of all differences in environment or behaviour, then they take language on holiday to participate in a specifically philosophical language-game, cut off from the rest of the world. For knowledge has no grounds at all, as Sellars showed; there are no epistemic 'givens' whatsoever, and consequently no private ones. There is only a web of belief, which we adjust wherever and whenever it suits us, so as to harness the causal pressures to our own benefit.

Since the conscious mind is of no moral or epistemological interest, then, and does not have a metaphysical essence which forces us to take it seriously, philosophers would do well to forget that it exists. Then in a generation or two it will cease to exist. They could make a good start by resisting the temptation to find some way of slotting it into the physical world; for reductive, metaphysical physicalism is as bad as metaphysical anything. Qualia will never be reduced, given that philosophers describe them differently from anything physical; a difference in canonical description makes ontological reduction impossible, and a lack thereof makes it redundant. But we should not aspire to such a thing in any case, because reduction is a relation between linguistic items, not ontological categories. As such, the irreducibility of mind is simply a matter of convenience; a convenience which will remain so long as the complexity of neurophysiology makes the practice of making incorrigible reports a useful linguistic tool. *This* irreducibility need not bother us; and vegetarian talk about consciousness, as used to distinguish waking from sleeping and intoxication from sobriety, is as thoroughly innocuous as the philosophical language game that has sprung up around it is tiresomely earnest.

And yet philosophers continue to ‘take consciousness seriously’; this is their mantra. Common sense demands it, they tell us. If we are to make any headway in understanding this puzzling phenomenon, they dutifully insist, we must presuppose from the outset that it is a reality we each know only from our own first-person perspective; that it sets us apart from physically identical zombies and behaviourally identical machines; that it is found in higher animals like humans, bears, and cats (easy to feel sympathy with); possibly in centipedes (much harder); probably not in amoebas (almost impossible); and definitely not in rocks (impossible). Unless of course powerful philosophical analysis persuades us to abandon some of the latter intuitions by turning panpsychist and spreading the stuff around like confetti; but even then, the initial intuition, that consciousness is inextricably linked to the first-person perspective, must remain sacrosanct, wherever it leads us. Orthodox theologians take a similar line. Theology, the orthodox say, begins with such facts as that the Catholic Eucharist is a supernatural event in which substantial change takes place. True, Anglican priests can perform functionally identical services, but these are not *The Eucharist*; the elements will not actually be changing their substantial form. It might look the same to an outsider, just as a zombie would look just like its conscious doppelgänger; but the vital ingredient is missing. For without the supernatural, you simply cannot have true religion, only a simulation of it; and without that elusive ‘what it is like’ which is only known from the inside, you cannot have true consciousness, only a simulation of it. Just as the common sense of the consciousness-believer confirms their beliefs every moment of their waking lives, so the common sense of the religious-believer tells them that atheists are deaf, dumb and blind.

Unfortunately, these philosophers will not be reasoned out of their belief in ineffable qualia. And they must be ineffable, because only what cannot be described at all cannot be described

differently. Only nonlinguistic contact with the ineffable can satisfy these philosophers' longing for intrinsicality; which is really a longing for an ahistorical, non-negotiable nature of reality to embody the redemptive truth about human life, which we may not hope to grasp, but may still hope to live. The clever dialectical moves of Rylean physicalists, no matter how valuable they might be to the rest of us when trying to unpick knots from our understanding, will not shake the faith of these true believers. They will, however, die; and we may at least hope that subsequent generations of philosophers will find something more interesting to do than take up their mission.

Books like this one will not help with the valuable process of forgetting. Anachronistically treating dead philosophers as if they were contemporary colleagues with whom we may exchange views does have its uses; by reconstructing an ideal Descartes, we may assure ourselves that there has been rational progress over the course of history – that we differ from him on grounds he could be led to accept. The latter kind of self-affirming, rational reconstruction is a distinct exercise, undertaken for distinct purposes, from historically reconstructing the Descartes who walked the streets of Amsterdam. But rational reconstruction is valuable only when there is progress we want to tell a story about; in which case we must *begin* by accepting that Descartes was pardonably ignorant of the fact that the mind is just the central nervous system under an alternative description, so as to imagine him seeing the error of his ways when brought up to speed with developments since his time. Such a Descartes might still have a place in contemporary philosophical debates, I suppose. But the premise of this book, namely that 'our' problem is that of Nagel, Searle and

Chalmers, invites us to believe that nothing significant has changed; it forces its ‘Great Philosophers’ into a depressing narrative of stagnation.¹

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¹ This is the essay I imagine Rorty would have written for this volume, had we been able to commission him. Consciousness was a recurring theme throughout his career, and I have drawn on a wide range of these sources; but the ones I most recommend are Rorty 1979: chapters 1 and 2; Rorty 1982; Rorty 1991; Rorty 1993; Rorty 1998; Rorty 2007. For a highly critical assessment of Rorty’s position on consciousness, see Tartaglia 2016a. And for a completely different take on consciousness and its metaphilosophical significance, which aims to explain the underlying motivation for his position (and others like it), see Tartaglia 2016b.