

If consciousness is physical, then we have good reason to believe that we are, indeed, just brains. But if it is not, other options present themselves.

ARE WE JUST BRAINS?

Not such a crazy idea after all, perhaps?

On the face of it, the answer is obviously ‘no’. The ‘we’ refers to members of the species *Homo sapiens*, and those animals are not brains. Yet familiar lines of philosophical reasoning raise doubts about this answer. For I could lose my arms and legs without dying. And perhaps I could lose the rest, so long as I carried on thinking. If I am thinking ‘oh no, I’ve lost my body’, I can hardly be dead. Not if we think of death in the philosophical, rather than clinical, sense of a permanent cessation of experience – which should not be thought of as eternal darkness, since that would just be more experience. But we are right to employ the philosophical sense, since medical ones are simply trying to track it; it is the worry that experience may continue after heartbeat and respiration have ceased, for instance, which leads doctors to now distinguish clinical from brain death. And brain death must be the key if all you need to carry on existing is experience, and all you need for that is brain activity. So maybe you are your brain after all.

Even if you think of death as a transition to another kind of experience, you are still thinking of experience as what ensures your continued existence. If God decided to terminate your heavenly experiences, *then* you would be dead; absolutely this time. Now of course we are animals of a certain kind – just as we are students, accountants, or whatever – but that,

according to this philosophical way of thinking, is not what we *essentially* are. And with this qualification in place, the idea that we are brains no longer looks so implausible. For brains are where the experiencing takes place. They consequently seem to be all that is essential to us, and so, in the relevant sense, *what we are*.

Dualism and Physicalism

Dualist philosophers have denied this, thinking that experience can take place without a brain. We can easily imagine this (try it), and it ties in nicely with the idea of an after-life. But it is no longer plausible to think of ourselves as an immaterial mind occupying a body. Not now science has shown the dependency of experiences on specific regions of the brain; and not after centuries of philosophical criticism of the idea of non-physical interaction with the physical. No matter what happens after death, during ordinary life at least, we have more than enough reason to deny that we could ever find ourselves thinking, ‘oh no, I’ve lost my brain’. So again, we seem to be back with the idea that we are our brains.

The problem, however, is that this only makes sense if consciousness is physical; if experiences *are* brain events. But if you think about an experience, and then a brain event, the idea that they are the same seems out of the question. Take a sip of coffee and think about the taste experience. Now think about a neural firing in your brain. You will not notice a similarity. So saying that the experience and brain event are the same thing, makes about as much sense as saying that Barack Obama and the River Vistula are! We have radically different conceptions of the president and the river, so it seems obvious they cannot be the same thing; and the situation with experiences and brain events is parallel. Perhaps this will

tempt you to say that brain events *cause* experiences; but then there are two different things causally related. And then you are back with dualism.

This is the problem physicalist philosophy of mind has grappled with since the mid-twentieth century. Gilbert Ryle (1949) and U.T. Place (1956) made the original suggestions for a way out, and physicalism has ever since consisted in variations on them. The first was that experience is an illusion; we judge there are experiences, but all that really exists are the judgements. And the second is that our conceptions of experiences are radically inaccurate conceptions of brain events. So the conception you form of the coffee experience *is* a conception of a brain event; it is just very different from the kind you form by observing brain-scanning devices.

I used to think something along these lines simply had to be correct, otherwise philosophy would be placed in the absurd position of challenging science. So I was committed to a form of physicalism. I changed my mind when I realised two things. Firstly, that physicalism can be rejected without challenging science; that the rejection could have purely philosophical implications. And secondly, that both physicalist proposals are ultimately the same. So given that the first is wildly implausible, and I now realised that the second leads to the same place, I concluded that consciousness is not physical. But in that case, what is it?

A Different Approach to Consciousness

Here is a new way of thinking about it, inspired by an important work that has yet to receive the attention it deserves: J.J. Valberg's *Death, Dream, and the Self*. Valberg suggests that we think of consciousness as the 'horizon' *within which* the world appears, rather than as

something which appears (such as your coffee experience). Although I take this idea in a different direction from Valberg, I think this is the key to the matter.

Suppose you are thinking about the problem of consciousness while dreaming. It would be an odd dream; but practically anything can happen in dreams. Suppose, then, that while you are dreaming (of sitting in a dreamed-up version of Plato's Academy, let's say), you start to think about the physicalist position that your experience is a brain event. This will be as baffling as if you were awake, but the difference is that if you are dreaming, the idea is obviously confused. This is because the brain event you naturally think about would be taking place in the brain in the dream; the one in the Academy. But you do not really have a brain in the dream, any more than you have arms and legs – these are all things your consciousness 'makes up'. They exist only in the context ('horizon') of the dream. There will be a brain event within your sleeping head, of course; the one rested on your pillow with eyes tightly shut. But that is not the brain event you will be thinking about. You will be thinking about the one in the Academy – which is obviously not what your experience really is.

What consciousness seems to do is create a context, with anything real existing outside of that context. Thus the real world in which you are asleep is outside the world of the dream. Whatever your dreaming experience is, then, must also be outside. But if that is how consciousness works in a dream, maybe it works like that in waking life too. If so, what experience really amounts to cannot be something inside the context waking consciousness creates; the one which contains the entire physical universe. So it cannot be physical. Just as the reality of a dream experience is only to be found outside the context of the dream, and hence cannot be a dream thing, so the reality of a waking experience is to be found outside the context of waking life, and hence cannot be a physical thing. What is it then? It belongs to

the independently existing reality which we make sense of as experience of a physical world. Our conception of the physical world cannot capture the nature of this reality, because it cannot incorporate experience; but it nevertheless provides the best conception of it available to us.

This talk of something outside of, or beyond, the physical world is bound to bring to mind religion. That is why philosophy in the age of modern science has steadfastly avoided it. But as I argue in *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, accepting this kernel of truth within our religious traditions, for the purposes of solving philosophical problems, is not going to lead us to the meaning of life those traditions have sought. Neither will it overturn the scientific world-view. It will only philosophically supplement it; by showing us, for example, that we are not just brains.

Suggested Reading

Place, U.T. (1956) 'Is Consciousness a Brain Process?', *British Journal of Psychology*, 47: 44-50.

Tartaglia, J. (2016) *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*, London: Bloomsbury.

Valberg, J.J. (2007) *Dream, Death, and the Self*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.