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Mind and its Place in the World

Non-Reductionist Approaches to the Ontology of Consciousness

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Mind and Its Place in the World: Introduction and Overview

Alexander Batthyany

1 About this Book

This volume consists of twelve articles and essays on the problem of consciousness. In its approach, our anthology follows the non-reductionist path typified by Karl Popper's and John C. Eccles' *The Self and Its Brain* (1977, Springer International), and more recently by John R. Smythies und John Beloff's edited collection, *The Case for Dualism* (1989, University of Virginia Press). While these volumes were pioneering in their time for their criticisms of reductionism, we felt that the non-reductionist tradition was again in need of renewal. Like the preceding works, the present volume distinguishes itself from the vast literature in consciousness studies by bringing together non-physicalistic, non-reductionist theories of consciousness, and by pointing out new sources and unexamined paths of research. The volume brings the non-reductionist tradition up to date, providing analysis and perspectives on the most recent trends in consciousness research.

On the other hand, whereas those two books exclusively argued for a dualist model of consciousness and its relation to the brain, the papers and articles gathered in this volume present several varieties of non-reductionism. The title of this book – *Mind and Its Place in the World: Non-reductionist Approaches to the Ontology of Consciousness* – is instructive. It was not our aim to present a new ontology of consciousness; rather, we wanted to re-open a debate which we believe was closed too early. In other words, the chapters in this book are not intended to represent any sort of concerted defense of a specific non-reductionist ontology of consciousness. We did not want to predetermine the outcome of the discourse by favouring a certain philosophical position, but intended to provide a forum in which many opinions and approaches could gain a fair hearing and in which researchers could discuss the promises, pitfalls, and explanatory strengths and weaknesses of non-reduc-

tionist ontologies of consciousness. Against this background, instead of restricting our authors to specific topics and methodologies, we invited them to provide a paper on whatever topic they deemed representative, important and conducive to a broadened and ontologically more flexible understanding of consciousness and the mind.

Collectively, the papers in this volume draw a map of the philosophical questions and positions of our current understanding of consciousness and its place in nature. Most of our authors follow Chalmers' suggestion to divide the problem of consciousness into two categories, which he marks as the "easy problems" and the "hard problem". The first category yields to conventional scientific methods and is usually researched in the context of psychology, the neurosciences and cognitive science. The hard problem fundamentally differs from the easy problems to the same extent as content differs from quality. Here the question is not about what we experience and by which information processes we navigate through the world, but more fundamentally: why and how it is that we do have subjective experiences and inner awareness at all? The papers of this volume carefully discuss the basic positions which so far have been proposed in order to tackle the hard problem and find their explanatory value wanting. Having isolated subjectivity as the core problem, most of our authors have a lot to say about explanations of the latter. For as soon as we accept that there really is a problem of consciousness, and one which is not addressed by mere reductionism, we have to turn to the metaphysical question: How does consciousness relate to the physical world? Our authors share the belief that within the framework of reductive physicalism all attempts to answer this question must founder. Either we adhere to reductive physicalism and thus sacrifice consciousness at the very outset, or we adhere to "non-reductive physicalism" which may do more justice to consciousness, but on the other hand systematically abuses the notion of physicalism. But obviously, there are unique features of consciousness, and to subtly smuggle them into the physical realm means to do injustice to both the mental and the physical.

Collectively, the resulting chapters touch on several critical themes that we believe will be useful in stimulating discussion and future research in non-reductionist consciousness studies. As noted earlier, the rationale underlying our selection was neither concerted nor was it topically restricted. As a consequence, the chapter cut across traditional fields of disciplines (e.g. physics,

epistemology, ontology, history of ideas, etc.). Also, in view of the fact that the only common denominator of the papers in this volume is a broadly defined non-reductionist stance, but no specific common ontological position on consciousness and the mind, grouping them by ontological position did not seem suitable for our purposes. Rather, we organized the book by the main focus of the respective papers, moving consecutively from general discussion of the scope and limits of reductionist and non-reductionist methodologies to special topics of non-reductive theories. The following paragraphs offer an introduction to some of the material and a brief overview of the general format.

2 Chapter overview

In the opening chapter, Hoyt Edge looks at the way how we explain consciousness rather than offering a detailed discussion of the merits of reductionism or non-reductionism. Edge proposes that there is a peculiarly Euro-American impulse to reductionism which led to many an explanatory success in our understanding of otherwise mystifying phenomena of the natural world. However, according to Edge, this very same approach must founder when it comes to subjectivity and consciousness. Hence, keeping with the general program of this volume, Edge's discussion implicitly assumes a non-reductionist stance as an adequate approach to consciousness and the mind, but at the same time goes a step back in order to try to understand what might have gone wrong in our investigation of consciousness. According to Edge, reductionism is a useful heuristic, but like all heuristics, it has its pitfalls. Yet once a heuristic becomes the default method of investigation, we are doomed – simply because all cases where the heuristic is inapplicable must remain beyond explanatory reach. Edge argues that the only way to overcome the overwhelming influence of our impulse to reductionism is to make it explicit, and to recognize it for what it is, and then compensate for it.

The second paper illustrates an alternative to what Edge describes as our impulse to reductionism. Donald P. Merrifield's personal essay reflects on scientific, philosophical and theological approaches to consciousness and its place in the world. Merrifield offers a phenomenological description and reflection of the (his) self in the natural world. His first-person approach is a useful model of an alternative to reductionist methodologies as it proposes

that common-sense and the scientific method form a continuum. Merrifield draws on Lonergan's study of human consciousness and its dynamic structure (self-appropriation). Lonergan's model is inclusive enough to transcend the classical dichotomy of reductionism and non-reductionism since it proposes a more liberal approach to what we find in us and the world and how we try to explain it. In the same vain, Merrifield argues for a deepened understanding of the interconnectedness of consciousness, mental content and selfhood.

The next three papers offer ontological perspectives in the narrower sense. Keeping with our objective to present a wide variety of non-reductionist approaches to consciousness and the mind, these papers present diverse arguments on what consciousness is and how to understand its relation to the physical world. The closest we get to a systematic defence of classical dualism are the papers by Peter J. King and by Russell Pannier and Thomas D. Sullivan, the former arguing for a refined version of Cartesian substance dualism and the latter arguing for what seems to boil down to a particularly strong version of property dualism.

Peter J. King, after discussing some of the traditional objections to substance dualism, sees as one of the main reasons for the dismissal of substance dualism the misconstrued idea that dualism is unscientific. King makes a rather bold assertion – he suggests an empirical experiment that would stand as a genuine empirical test of substance dualism. Unfortunately, the likelihood that such an experiment will be carried out is low, since it would entail having a volunteer undergoing a major surgery (a brain transplantion). Still, even if it is not likely that such an experiment will be carried out anywhere in the near future, King argues that the results would favour a dualist account of the conscious mind (and more generally, personhood).

In their joint paper, Russell Pannier and Thomas D. Sullivan, develop a number of arguments for property dualism. Pannier and Sullivan distinguish between two versions of property dualism: strong and weak. They argue that while substance dualism does entail property dualism, property dualism (weak or strong) does not necessarily entail substance dualism. Pannier and Sullivan, in their ensuing discussion, describe an intermediate position between dualism and monism: having shown that mental properties exist and are sufficiently different from physical properties as to deserve to be regarded as a category of their own, they argue for a re-unification of mind and matter. To which extend then is this model non-reductionist? Pannier and Sullivan re-

fer to the Aristotelian tradition which characterizes some entities as forms, i.e. as causally active immaterial sources of both mental and physical energy which serve to unify matter in a structurally organized way. Thus the "body" is not in itself an individual substance; rather, there is only one substance – the embodied form. Being immaterial, an Aristotelian unifying form is, a fortiori, not totally physical. Hence physicalist reductionism is ruled out on this account, but so is traditional substance dualism.

Yet another non-physicalist alternative in our understanding of consciousness is idealist monism. Peter B. Lloyd argues that the classical formulation of the hard problem – why is there consciousness at all? – is badly misconstrued. Rather, the real question is: why is there matter at all? Interestingly enough, once one gives in to this question, things fall neatly into place and consciousness no longer appears as enigmatic as it does if one tries to reconcile it with our current understanding of the physical world. Unfortunately, however, we exchange one hard problem with the next. For if we take consciousness for granted, matter (and more generally, non-sentience) becomes increasingly difficult to understand. Lloyd employs a comparative analysis of mental and material terms and shows that while the former are directly given, the latter are inferred, notional, constructed. On this basis, Lloyd offers a detailed discussion of the idealist monist ontology of consciousness.

Having tested the grounds for differing basic ontologies of the mind, the next wave of papers looks at content rather than mere experience and its ontological underpinnings. Fiona Steinkamp takes as her problem the question: How do I know that this thought is mine? Steinkamp discusses this question in the context of both normal communication and telepathy, the apparent exchange of information without the use of any of the known senses. Having a thought is a private event which in a very concrete sense happens within us – yet thought content, no matter whether telepathic in origin or generated through more conventional means, relates in one way or the other to an outer, public world. Hence the question of the origin and ownership of thought closely reflects the hard problem – and at the same time transcends it. Indeed, Steinkamp's paper shows that Chalmers' distinction between easy and hard problems, nowadays widely adopted by the contemporary philosophy of mind, might not be as compelling as it appears at a first glance.

Steven Lehar carries further some of the points that Steinkamp raises. In particular his paper offers a thorough critique of naïve realism. Furthermore,

Lehar argues for a careful re-evaluation of the merits and pitfalls of introspection and argues for a quantitative and more inclusive phenomenology of the dimensions of conscious experience. As in Steinkamp's paper, the boundaries between easy and hard problems once again turn out to be artificial and not overly conducive to a clearer understanding of man's mental life: Lehar argues that mental events, i.e. the data of our phenomenology of consciousness, are inconsistent with physicalist reductionism. Only when we appreciate consciousness and its manifestations in their full range and richness, says Lehar, can we come to a proper understanding of consciousness and its relationship to the natural world.

Riccardo Manzotti proposes a radically new approach to the relationship of subjects and objects, one which is based not on a static understanding of the world (and its experiencers), but rather on the process of relating. Based on this process-oriented ontology, Manzotti argues that as soon as we conceive the world as made of processes extended in time and space, conscious experience becomes reframed as an extended collection of processes comprehending all those events that are part of our conscious experience. It is a radical proposal (and Manzotti calls it as such), but once you give in to its few basic premises, the problem of consciousness becomes considerably easier to address within a non-reductionist framework. In fact, the whole idea of reductionism and non-reductionism looses much of its force once we come to the understanding that the world consists not of things, but of events.

In his paper, Paul Løvland, discusses the explanatory methodology of the natural sciences and their applicability to our philosophical and psychological understanding of actions. Løvland draws on the analogy of human action and other processes in nature, offering a very rigorous methodology which takes seriously both basic sets of data: our subjective experience of wanting, willing, wishing and intending, and the known mechanisms and laws governing force, energy and events.

After the papers concerned with mental content and action, Howard Robinson's paper takes the issue a step further and addresses the entity whose events mental events are, namely, the self. Robinson sees the self as simple and immaterial substance (i.e. a Cartesian ego) and defends this view by taking a critical look at Parfit's radical reductionism. Robinson presents a number of arguments which are based on the self's identity in time. According to Robinson, even soft physicalism or property dualism cannot do justice to

selfhood; hence substance dualism emerges as the only coherent alternative ontological model of the self and its persistence in time.

The last two papers of this volume address the problem of consciousness and its relation to the physical world by approaching it from two very different perspectives and with somewhat differing results: Gershon Kurizki presents his model of Monistic Quantum Spinozicism, a decidedly non-reductionist (and non-dualistic) description of the physical world which is able to accommodate consciousness without reducing it.

Kenneth Arnette on the other hand offers a dualistic account of consciousness which is primarily based on his argument of the boundary conditions of materialist monism: Arnette argues that consciousness is intractable by the tools of a reductionist approach, precisely because the latter ignores a number of phenomena which are not yet (and, according to Arnette and a number of prominent researcher in the evolving field of near-death-studies, never will be) within the grasp of physicalism. In other words, Arnette argues that physicalism is self-evident and self-supporting only insofar as it continues to discard those data which may be considered to be its strongest counter-arguments. Arnette then analyses data from near-death experiences – just one example of a class of phenomena which, according to Arnette, show that physicalism cannot do justice to our mental lives.

Where are we left after having gone through these twelve contributions? It seems as if the non-reductionist tradition within consciousness research is as diverse as its physicalist-reductionist counterpart. But it is not as loud. We hope that with this volume, we have helped some of the alternative accounts of consciousness gain a fair hearing and hopefully also encouraged others to follow an explanatory path less travelled – a path which in the end may turn out to be right approach after all.

In the following part of the introduction, Avshalom Elitzur draws a map of the philosophical questions and positions of contemporary consciousness studies.