

The Consciousness Deniers

Galen Strawson

What is the silliest claim ever made? The competition is fierce, but I think the answer is easy. Some people have denied the existence of consciousness: conscious experience, the subjective character of experience, the “what-it-is-like” of experience. Next to this denial—I’ll call it “the Denial”—every known religious belief is only a little less sensible than the belief that grass is green.

The Denial began in the twentieth century and continues today in a few pockets of philosophy and psychology and, now, information technology. It had two main causes: the rise of the behaviorist approach in psychology, and the naturalistic approach in philosophy. These were good things in their way, but they spiraled out of control and gave birth to the Great Silliness. I want to consider these main causes first, and then say something rather gloomy about a third, deeper, darker cause. But before that, I need to comment on what is being denied—consciousness, conscious experience, experience for short.

What is it? Anyone who has ever seen or heard or smelled anything knows what it is; anyone who has ever been in pain, or felt hungry or hot or cold or remorseful, dismayed, uncertain, or sleepy, or has suddenly remembered a missed appointment. All these things involve what are sometimes called “qualia”—that is to say, different types or qualities of conscious experience. What I am calling the Denial is the denial that anyone has ever really had any of these experiences.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that most Deniers deny that they’re Deniers. “Of course, we agree that consciousness or experience exists,” they say—but when they say this they mean something that specifically excludes qualia.

Who are the Deniers? I have in mind—at least—those who fully subscribe to something called “philosophical behaviorism” as well as those who fully subscribe to something called “functionalism” in the philosophy of mind. Few have been fully explicit in their denial, but among those who have been, we find Brian Farrell, Paul Feyerabend, Richard Rorty, and the generally admirable Daniel Dennett. Ned Block once remarked that Dennett’s attempt to fit consciousness or “qualia” into his theory of reality “has the relation to qualia that the US Air Force had to so many Vietnamese villages: he destroys qualia in order to save them.”

One of the strangest things the Deniers say is that although it *seems* that there is conscious experience, there isn’t *really* any conscious experience: the seeming is, in fact, an illusion. The trouble with this is that any such illusion is already and necessarily an actual instance of the thing said to be an illusion. Suppose you’re hypnotized to feel intense pain. Someone may say that you’re not really in pain, that the pain is illusory, because you haven’t really suffered any bodily damage. But to seem to feel pain *is* to be in pain. It’s not possible here to open up a gap between appearance and reality, between what *is* and what *seems*.

Some people not only deny the existence of consciousness; they also claim not to know what is being presumed to exist. Block responds to these deniers by quoting the reply Louis Armstrong is said to have given to those who asked him what jazz was (some people credit Fats Waller): “If you got to ask, you ain’t never gonna get to know.” Another response is



Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz/The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed
by SCALA / Art Resource, NY
Lucy McKenzie: Untitled, 2002

almost as good, although it's condemned by some who follow Wittgenstein. If someone asks what conscious experience is, you say, "You know what is from your own case." (You can add, "Here's an example," and give them a sharp kick.) When it comes to conscious experience, there's a rock-bottom sense in which we're fully acquainted with it just in having it. *The having is the knowing*. So when people say that consciousness is a mystery, they're wrong—because we know what it is. It's the most familiar thing there is—however hard it is to put into words.

What people often mean when they say that consciousness is a mystery is that it's mysterious how consciousness can be simply a matter of physical goings-on in the brain. But here, they make a Very Large Mistake, in Winnie-the-Pooh's terminology—the mistake of thinking that we know enough about the physical components of the brain to have good reason to think that these components can't, on their own, account for the existence of consciousness. We don't.

*

The first cause of the Denial, behaviorism, took off about a hundred years ago as a methodological research program in experimental psychology. Psychologists had found that they couldn't properly study consciousness because the data provided by introspection were irremediably vague. In order to be a proper science, psychology had to stick to publicly observable behavioral phenomena that are precisely measurable. The foundational text is generally agreed to be John Watson's 1913 paper "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It."

Methodological behaviorism was a good and fruitful idea. For a few years, all went well. Then philosophers came on the scene, and morphed a methodology into a metaphysics. They took moderate *methodological* behaviorism, which puts consciousness aside and limits the scientific study of mind to behavior, and blew it up into mad *metaphysical* behaviorism that claims consciousness is nothing more than behavior and dispositions to behavior. As the philosopher C.D. Broad put it in 1925, this is a form of "reductive materialism."

Proponents of this view insist that their position does not *eliminate* consciousness, but instead *reduces* it to something else. They're right, formally speaking: to reduce X to Y isn't to say that X doesn't exist. It's simply to say that X is "really just" Y, that X is "nothing more than" Y, that X is "nothing over and above" Y. And since Y is assumed to exist, X is also held to exist. For although X is nothing *more* than Y, it's also nothing *less* than Y. When you reduce chemical processes to physical processes, you don't deny that chemical processes exist.

All true. And yet, to reduce consciousness to behavior and dispositions to behavior is to eliminate it. To say that consciousness is really nothing more than (dispositions to) behavior is to say that it doesn't exist. Reductionists may continue to deny this, or claim that it begs the question—that it assumes the truth of the conclusion for which it's arguing. Formally speaking, it does beg the question, and begging the question is a well-known theoretical sin. Sometimes, however, it is the correct response.

To see this, it helps to compare the behaviorists' reductionist theory of consciousness with the Pizza-ists' reductionist theory of consciousness: that consciousness is really just pizza. Formally speaking, the Pizza Theory fully allows that consciousness exists, for pizza certainly exists. So, too, philosophical behaviorism fully allows that consciousness exists, because behavior certainly exists. But to say that experience is just pizza *is* to deny that consciousness exists, for we know that conscious experience exists, we know what it is like, and we know that it isn't just pizza. So, too, for the claim that consciousness is just behavior.

This, then, is *philosophical* behaviorism, the first main version of the Denial. It was already stirring when Russell published *The Analysis of Mind* (1921), and was clearly on the table when Broad excoriated it in *The Mind and its Place in Nature* (1925), worrying that he might "be accused of breaking a butterfly on a wheel." It may be that relatively few psychologists fell into outright philosophical behaviorism, but there was cross-infection. In 1923, the psychologist Karl Lashley aimed "to show that the statement, 'I am conscious' does not mean anything more than the statement that 'such and such physiological processes are going on within me.'" Still, even an austere experimentalist like E.G. Boring, one of

the leading “operationist” psychologists in the mid-twentieth century, held firmly in 1948 to the view that experience or “consciousness is what you experience immediately.”

Two years later, however, Brian Farrell judged Boring’s claim to be a “comical and pathogenic remark.” Farrell thought better times were coming. If Western societies were truly to assimilate the work of the relevant sciences, “then it is quite possible that the notion of ‘experience’ will be generally discarded as delusive.” As things are, it’s only by “restricting the use of the word ‘experience’ to ‘raw feels’ [that we can] go on defending the view that ‘experience’ and ‘behavior’ are not identical; and this line of defence is hopeless.” In the present state of our language, “the notion of ‘experience’ can be shown to resemble an occult notion like ‘witchcraft’ in a primitive community that is in the process of being acculturated to the West.” Fortunately, science “is getting to the brink of rejecting [experience]... as ‘unreal’ or ‘non-existent.’”

At this point, the philosophers had left the psychologists in the dust in the race to folly. Farrell’s thoughts were echoed by, among others, the radical philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend (1962) and Richard Rorty (1965); and they were influential in the vast upsurge of discussion of consciousness that followed the publication of the psychologist Ullin Place’s paper “Is Consciousness a Brain Process?” (1956), and the Australian philosopher Jack Smart’s paper “Sensations and Brain Processes” (1959). But, by now, something else was in play. For philosophers were not—or not primarily—motivated by behaviorist considerations in their denial of the existence of consciousness. Their line of thought was, in one striking respect, far worse. For it does at least follow from philosophical behaviorism that consciousness doesn’t really exist, whereas these philosophers were motivated by something—a commitment to naturalism—from which it doesn’t even begin to follow that consciousness doesn’t exist.

*

Naturalism states that everything that concretely exists is entirely natural; nothing supernatural or otherwise non-natural exists. Given that we know that conscious experience exists, we must as naturalists suppose that it’s wholly natural. And given that we’re specifically *materialist* or *physicalist* naturalists (as almost all naturalists are), we must take it that conscious experience is wholly material or physical. And so we should, because it’s beyond reasonable doubt that experience—what W.V. Quine called “experience in all its richness... the heady luxuriance of experience” of color and sound and smell—is wholly a matter of neural goings-on: wholly natural and wholly physical.

It’s true that we can’t understand how experience can be wholly a matter of neural goings-on, when we start out from the way the brain appears to physics or neurophysiology. Crucially, though, there’s no reason to give the way the brain appears to physics or neurophysiology priority over the way it appears to the person having the experience. Rather the reverse, as Russell pointed out as early as 1927: he annoyed many, and incurred some ridicule, when he proposed that it was only the having of conscious experience that gives us any insight into the intrinsic nature of the stuff of the brain. His point was simple: first, we know something fundamental about the essential nature of conscious experience just in having it; and second, conscious experience is literally part of the physical stuff of the brain, if materialism is true.

Genuine naturalists, then, are outright realists about consciousness, who accept that they are, in many ways, profoundly ignorant of the fundamental nature of the physical. They understand the respect in which the great naturalistic project, spearheaded by physics, hasn’t decreased our ignorance, but *increased* it—precisely because of its advances and successes. We don’t understand quantum mechanics, or “dark energy,” or “dark matter,” or a host of other things. So be it.

But then—in the middle of the twentieth century—something extraordinary happens. Members of a small but influential group of analytic philosophers come to think that true *naturalistic materialism rules out realism about consciousness*. They duly conclude that consciousness doesn’t exist. They reach this conclusion in spite of the fact that conscious experience is a wholly natural phenomenon, whose existence is more certain than any other natural phenomenon, and with which we’re directly acquainted, at least in certain fundamental respects. These philosophers thus endorse the Denial.

The problem is not that they take naturalism to entail materialism—they’re right to do so. The problem is that they endorse

the claim that *conscious experience can't possibly be wholly physical*. They think they know this, although genuine naturalism doesn't warrant it in any way. So they, like the behaviorists, claim that consciousness doesn't exist, although many of them conceal this by using the word "consciousness" in a way that omits the central feature of consciousness—the qualia, the "heady luxuriance."

The situation grows stranger when one reflects that almost all their materialist forebears, stretching back over 2,000 years to Leucippus and Democritus, completely reject the view that experience can't be physical, and hold instead (as all serious materialists must) that experience is wholly physical. Russell made the key observation in 1927: "We do not know enough of the intrinsic character of events outside us to say whether it does or does not differ from that of 'mental' events"—whose nature we do know. He never wavered from this point. In 1948, he noted that physics simply can't tell us "whether the physical world is, or is not, different in intrinsic character from the world of mind." In 1956, he remarked that "we know nothing about the intrinsic quality of physical events except when these are mental events that we directly experience." But the Deniers weren't listening, and they still aren't.

Why do the Deniers ignore a long line of distinguished materialist predecessors and ally themselves with Descartes, their sworn enemy, in holding that experience can't possibly be physical—thereby obliging themselves to endorse the Denial? The answer appears to be that they share with Descartes one very large assumption: that we know enough about the physical to be certain that experience can't be physical.

It's easy to see how, in Descartes's day, these two assumptions might have seemed plainly right. Matter, according to the "corpuscularian" mechanics of the day, consisted of little particles of various shapes bumping into and hooking up with each other in various ways. There was nothing more to it, and it seemed evident that it couldn't possibly be, or account for, conscious experience. The intuition seems more excusable then than today, when quantum field theory has done away with the gritty particles of the past.

The Cartesians, then, "established it as a principle that we are perfectly acquainted with the essence of matter," as Hume put it in 1738. This was a great mistake, and 250 years later, the leading materialist philosopher David Lewis made the same mistake, claiming "that the physical nature of ordinary matter under mild conditions is very well understood." True, this isn't a claim of perfect acquaintance, but it is a version of the Cartesian view, and it is assumed to justify the claim that we know enough about the physical to know that experience can't be physical. For naturalistic materialists the conclusion follows immediately and inexorably: consciousness doesn't really exist.

One of the strangest things about the spread of the naturalism-based Denial in the second half of the twentieth century is that it involved overlooking a point about physics that was once a commonplace, and which I call "the silence of physics." Physics is magnificent: many of its claims are either straightforwardly true or very good approximations to truth. But all of its claims about the physical are expressed by statements of number or equations. They're truths about quantities and relational structures instantiated in concrete reality; and these truths tell us nothing at all about the ultimate nature of the *stuff* of reality, the stuff that has the structure that physics analyzes. Here is Russell again (in 1948): "the physical world is only known as regards certain abstract features of its space-time structure... we know nothing about the events that make matter, except their space-time structure." Stephen Hawking agrees in 1988: physics is "just a set of rules and equations," which leaves open the question "what... breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe." Physics has nothing to say about things that can't be expressed in general rules and equations.

This is the silence of physics—a simple point that destroys the position of many of those today who, covertly or overtly, endorse the Denial. When we grasp the silence of physics, and ask, with Eddington, "what knowledge have we of the nature of atoms that renders it at all incongruous that they should constitute a thinking [i.e., conscious] object?" The answer is simple: none. The false naturalists appear to ignore this point. They rely instead on an imaginative picture of the physical, a picture that goes radically beyond anything that physics tells or could tell us. They are in Russell's words "guilty, unconsciously and in spite of explicit disavowals, of a confusion in their imaginative picture" of reality. This

picture is provably incorrect if materialism is indeed true because, in that case, experience is wholly physical yet excluded from the picture.

*

The facts of the Denial are before us, and we have an account of how they arose: first, from a mistaken interpretation of behaviorism; then, from a mistake about what a naturalistic outlook requires. But I believe we still lack a satisfactory explanation of the Denial as long as we lack a satisfactory explanation of how these mistakes could have been made. How could anybody have been led to something so silly as to deny the existence of conscious experience, the only general thing we know for certain exists?

The explanation is as ancient as it is simple. As Cicero says, there is “no statement so absurd that no philosopher will make it.” Descartes agrees, in 1637: “Nothing can be imagined which is too strange or incredible to have been said by some philosopher.” Thomas Reid concurs in 1785: “There is nothing so absurd which some philosophers have not maintained.” Louise Antony puts it like this in 2007: “There is... no banality so banal that no philosopher will deny it.”

Descartes adds that when it comes to speculative matters, “the scholar... will take... the more pride [in his views] the further they are from common sense... since he will have had to use so much more... skill and ingenuity in trying to render them plausible.” Or as C.D. Broad says, some 300 years later: some ideas are “so preposterously silly that only very learned men could have thought of them... by a ‘silly’ theory I mean one which may be held at the time when one is talking or writing professionally, but which only an inmate of a lunatic asylum would think of carrying into daily life.”

We know that silliness happens, but we may still wonder how it is possible. Perhaps we should turn to individual psychology: it can seem exciting to hold views that seem preposterously contrary to common sense—there’s something Oedipally thrilling about it when the father is an old gentleman called Ordinary Opinion. Herbert Feigl adds another psychoanalytic note: “Scholars cathect [or invest] certain ideas so strongly and their outlook becomes so ego involved that they erect elaborate barricades of defenses, merely to protect their pet ideas from the blows (or the slower corrosive effects) of criticism.”

These observations may account for why, as Hobbes notes in 1645, “arguments seldom work on men of wit and learning when they have once engaged themselves in a contrary opinion.” Descartes is right again when he says:

It frequently happens that even when we know that something is false, we get used to hearing it, and thus gradually get into the habit of regarding it as true. Confident assertion and frequent repetition are the two ploys that are often more effective than the most weighty arguments when dealing with ordinary people or those [including philosophers] who do not examine things carefully.

This is what psychologists now call “the familiarity effect” or “mere-exposure effect.” And here, Sir Francis Bacon steps in, writing in 1620:

Once the human mind has favoured certain views, it pulls everything else into agreement with and support for them. Should they be outweighed by more powerful countervailing considerations, it either fails to notice these, or scorns them, or makes fine distinctions in order to neutralize and so reject them.

Very well, but how is it possible to deny the existence of consciousness? Russell thinks it’s the fault of philosophy. There are things that “only philosophers with a long training in absurdity could succeed in believing.” But it isn’t just philosophers, as Mark Twain notes: “There isn’t anything so grotesque or so incredible that the average human being can’t believe it.”

This is how philosophers in the twentieth century came to endorse the Denial, the silliest view ever held in the history of human thought. “When I squint just right,” Dennett writes in 2013, “it *does* sort of seem that consciousness must be

something in addition to all the things it does for us and to us, some special private glow or *here-I-am-ness* that would be absent in any robot... But I've learned not to credit the hunch. I think it is a flat-out mistake, a failure of imagination." His position was summarized in an interview in *The New York Times*: "The elusive subjective conscious experience—the redness of red, the painfulness of pain—that philosophers call qualia? Sheer illusion." If he's right, no one has ever really suffered, in spite of agonizing diseases, mental illness, murder, rape, famine, slavery, bereavement, torture, and genocide. And no one has ever caused anyone else pain.

This is the Great Silliness. We must hope that it doesn't spread outside the academy, or convince some future information technologist or roboticist who has great power over our lives.

This essay is adapted from *Things That Bother Me: Death, Freedom, the Self, Etc.*, published this week by New York Review Books.

March 13, 2018, 3:00 pm

RELATED



Consciousness and the World
Riccardo Manzotti and Tim Parks



The Passions of Bertrand Russell 
Bernard Williams



The Assault on Reason
Zia Haider Rahman

© 1963-2018 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved.

‘Magic, Illusions, and Zombies’: An Exchange

Daniel C. Dennett, reply by Galen Strawson

In response to:

“The Consciousness Deniers,” *NYR Daily*, March 13, 2018

To the Editor:

I thank Galen Strawson for his passionate attack on my views, since it provides a large, clear target for my rebuttal. I would never have dared put Strawson’s words in the mouth of Otto (the fictional critic I invented as a sort of ombudsman for the skeptical reader of *Consciousness Explained*) for fear of being scolded for creating a strawman. A full-throated, table-thumping Strawson serves me much better. He clearly believes what he says, thinks it is very important, and is spectacularly wrong in useful ways. His most obvious mistake is his misrepresentation of my main claim:

If [Dennett] is right, no one has ever really suffered, in spite of agonizing diseases, mental illness, murder, rape, famine, slavery, bereavement, torture, and genocide. And no one has ever caused anyone else pain.

I don’t deny the existence of consciousness; *of course*, consciousness exists; it just isn’t what most people think it is, as I have said many times. I do grant that Strawson expresses quite vividly a widespread conviction about *what consciousness is*. Might people—and Strawson, in particular—be wrong about this? That is the issue.

He invokes common sense against which to contrast “the silliest claim ever made” (I’m honored!), but here is some other common sense that pushes back: when you encounter people who claim to have seen a magician saw a lady in half, counsel them to postpone their extravagant hypotheses—backwards time travel, multi-world wormholes, quantum entanglement, “real magic”—until they have exhausted the more mundane possibilities. Unrevolutionary science has discovered good explanations for such heretofore baffling phenomena as reproduction, metabolism, growth, and self-repair, for instance. So while it is possible that we will have to overthrow that science in order to account for consciousness, we should explore the default possibilities first. This is the pragmatic policy of naturalism, nothing more. And since we already have lots of evidence that nature has devised a cornucopia of shortcuts and indirect tricks to help animals cope with the complexities of their environments, we would be wise to check first for the possibility that we have somehow inflated our own sense of the “magic” of our consciousness.

Strawson claims to know already that this is hopeless, and even urges a pre-emptive strike against the attempt. He insists, citing Bertrand Russell as his authority, that “we know something fundamental about the essential nature of conscious experience just in having it.” How strange it would be for us to know something “fundamental” about the “essential nature” of a phenomenon simply by undergoing it! We can know something important, something that cannot be ignored, while still being in the dark about the “essential nature” of a phenomenon. Some cancer sufferers think they know something fundamental about their cancer just because it is theirs; but while they no doubt know something about *how it*



Bridgeman Art
The Scribe, an automaton by Pierre Jaquet-Droz (1721–90), 1770

seems to them, this is not the kind of knowledge of “something fundamental” to pit against empirical research.

Russell’s claim is not a deliverance of introspection or common sense. It is not something too obvious to need support, however appealing it may at first seem. It is a first shaky step toward a philosophical theory. I offer a rival theory, which actually tackles the question of *how* we are able to have “direct acquaintance” with the *contents* (not the properties) of our experiences. To oversimplify, the beliefs you arrive at “directly”—without effort or noticeable analysis—about your experience of the world neither need nor permit any further process of introspection to enable you to tell yourself, or others, what it is like to be you at the moment. While we can know many things about the *contents* of our conscious experience, we have no privileged insight into how this is possible, and we have no immunity to error on this score. There’s a difficult empirical question of how a person’s brain exploits its currently active information to modulate any verbal or non-verbal behavior (or emotional state or memory), and this question is not answered, but only hidden from view, by Strawson’s pontification: “When it comes to conscious experience, there’s a rock-bottom sense in which we’re fully acquainted with it just in having it.” Sheer bluster, even if many distinguished philosophers have made similar declarations. Strawson uses another misrepresentation to attempt a *reductio ad absurdum*:

One of the strangest things the Deniers say is that although it *seems* that there is conscious experience, there isn’t *really* any conscious experience: the seeming is, in fact, an illusion. The trouble with this is that any such illusion is already and necessarily an actual instance of the thing said to be an illusion.

No, we Deniers do not say this. We say that there isn’t any conscious experience *in the sense that Strawson insists upon*. We say consciousness *seems* (to many who reflect upon the point) to involve being “directly acquainted,” as Strawson puts it, with some fundamental properties (“qualia”), but *this* is an illusion, a philosopher’s illusion. So, unless Strawson has something like papal infallibility, which I doubt, this illusion is not “necessarily” an actual instance of his kind of consciousness.

In the end, Strawson reveals his agenda:

This is the Great Silliness. We must hope that it doesn’t spread outside the academy, or convince some future information technologist or roboticist who has great power over our lives.

Strawson apparently thinks that unless *his view* about consciousness is vindicated, we stand in danger of abandoning our morality, ignoring suffering, depersonalizing people. Christians have had similar worries about the imminent collapse of society if people abandon the concept of an immortal soul. And in the sixteenth century, Philipp Melanchthon urged that some “Christian prince” should suppress Copernicus’s theory that the earth went around the sun, fearing the dire consequences if this truth leaked out. We can handle the truth, Galen. We don’t need your kind of mind to preserve the meaning of our lives.

Daniel C. Dennett
 Director, Center for Cognitive Studies
 Tufts University
 Medford, Massachusetts

Galen Strawson replies:

Philosophers use the word “zombie” as a technical term: “a philosopher’s zombie,” Daniel Dennett writes in *Consciousness Explained* (1991), “is behaviorally indistinguishable from a normal human being, but is not conscious.” The zombie may, for example, be a piece of brilliant machinery with flesh-like covering that looks and acts like a human being, although “there is nothing it is like to be a zombie; it just seems that way to observers.”

Plainly, the zombie is not conscious in the standard, rich, “qualia”-involving sense of “conscious” that I stress and that Dennett rejects. It doesn’t feel pain when its arm is shot off, any more than the Arnold Schwarzenegger character does in the 1984 film *The Terminator*.

“Are zombies possible?” Dennett asks. “They’re not just possible, they’re actual. We’re all zombies.” Here, his view seems plain. In the book, he adds a footnote—“It would be an act of desperate intellectual dishonesty to quote this assertion out of context!”—so I hope that I have given sufficient context. But let me provide more (all the quotations in what follows are from Dennett, from various books and papers).

“The idea that there is something like a ‘phenomenal field’ of ‘phenomenal properties’ *in addition to* the informational/functional properties accommodated by my theory” of consciousness “is shown to be a multi-faceted illusion, an artifact of bad theorizing,” he wrote in a 1993 essay, “Précis of Consciousness Explained,” in the journal *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Here, Dennett is clear about what he *doesn’t* mean by “consciousness.” We see how he can say, in his reply to me, that “*of course*, consciousness exists.” He can say this because *the zombie is conscious* in his terms: it has all the “informational/functional” properties of a human being; it is behaviorally indistinguishable from a human being.

“Let me confirm [Frank] Jackson’s surmise that I am his behaviorist; I unhesitatingly endorse the claim that ‘necessarily, if two organisms are behaviorally exactly alike, they are psychologically exactly alike,’” he writes in another paper that year in the same journal, “The Message is: There is no Medium.” Once again, Dennett holds that a zombie is as conscious as we are, although “there is nothing it is like to be a zombie.” A zombie isn’t conscious at all, in the ordinary sense of the word, but it’s fully conscious in Dennett’s sense of the word, given its “informational/functional properties.”

The same goes for us, according to Dennett. We’re not conscious at all, in the ordinary sense of the word: “We’re all zombies.” He confirms this view in a 2013 podcast. We find in nature “any number of varieties of stupendous organization and sensitivity and discrimination... The idea that, in addition to all of those, there’s this extra special something—subjectivity—what distinguishes us from the zombie—that’s an illusion.”

Consider standard philosophical examples of “qualia”—intense pain, orgasm, visual experience of Times Square at midnight. In *Consciousness Explained*, Dennett allows that it really *seems* to us that we have such qualia, but insists that it doesn’t follow that we *really* have them. I argued that this is a false move, because to *seem* to have qualia is necessarily already to have qualia, and Dennett moved, in his 2007 paper “Heterophenomenology reconsidered,” published in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, to the view that there aren’t even any real seemings: “There are no *real seemings*... judgments are about the qualia of experiences in the same way novels are about their characters. Rabbit Angstrom [in John Updike’s novels] sure seems like a real person, but he isn’t... If materialism is true, there are no real seemings.”

“When I squint just right,” Dennett writes in his 2013 book *Intuition Pumps*, “it *does* sort of seem that consciousness must be something in addition to all the things it does for us and to us, some kind of special private glow or *here-I-am-ness* that would be absent in any robot. But I’ve learned not to credit the hunch. I think it is a flat-out mistake.”

This is “eliminativism” about consciousness, denial of the existence of consciousness. Dennett is not alone. He’s backed up by a good number of present-day philosophers, including recently Keith Frankish, Jay Garfield, and Mark Siderits, as well as psychologists like Stanislas Dehaene. The fundamental mistake they make is to think that there is anything, either in physics or in any other part of science, or indeed in Buddhism (Garfield and Siderits both study Buddhist philosophy), that gives us any good reason to deny the existence of (real) consciousness.

“Sometimes philosophers clutch an insupportable hypothesis to their bosoms and run headlong over the cliff edge,” Dennett writes in a 1995 essay, “The Unimagined Preposterousness of Zombies: Commentary on Moody, Flanagan, and Polger,” in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. “Then, like cartoon characters, they hang there in midair, until they

notice what they have done and gravity takes over.” I agree with Dennett about this, and about much else (including Darwin and religion), but here, his image is incomplete. The trouble with philosophers is that gravity doesn’t take over. They continue to cycle in midair, legs a-blur.

April 3, 2018, 7:00 am

RELATED



The Consciousness Deniers
Galen Strawson



Consciousness and the World
Riccardo Manzotti and Tim Parks



‘The Mystery of Consciousness’: An Exchange
Daniel C. Dennett, reply by John R. Searle

© 1963-2018 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved.