

# Consciousness: Problems with Perspectives

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# **Consciousness: Problems with Perspectives**

### **Abstract**

*The paper deals with some misconceptions concerning 'privileged' (and at the same time 'mysterious'?) access to our own experiences from the first-person perspective, points to the limitations of this immediacy, and questions the solipsist privacy of subjectivity. Based on the conviction that the identification of 'point of view' with 'perspective' proves to be problematic, the author argues that we may take different perspectives from the same (person) point of view. As embodied and embedded cognitive persons we practice the interchange of perspectival attitudes towards our own subjectivity in our daily lives far more easily and frequently than we are prone to admit in our theories. This kind of methodology, part of which is also the objectivist third-person approach, does not have the power to revise the irreducibility between the subjective and the empirical, although it does appeal to the mind open to the intersubjective space, in which the irreducible can still be communicated, compared and complemented.*

### **Keywords**

consciousness, point of view, first/second/third-person perspective, subjectivity, heterophenomenology, intersubjectivity

## **Introduction: Questioning the Questions**

Any current attempt to define consciousness seems to be doomed to excuses (i.e. today's standard of scientific competence has not yet advanced sufficiently to provide us with the final knowledge that would make consciousness less mysterious), to paradoxes (i.e. that which seems to be the most intimate part of our 'self' proves to be incredibly difficult to access and report), to warnings (i.e. the object of description is neither single nor unified, and we actually deal with multiple consciousnesses), to doubts (whether empirical research can account for subjective feels), to speculations (whether silicon matter can ever produce consciousness), etc.

The "mystery of consciousness" issues not only from the current inability to provide a competent and complete explanation for the 'what', 'how' and 'why' questions concerning consciousness, but also from the fundamental recognition *that* something physical can give rise to the psyche, *that* matter can cause mental phenomena. Maybe, as I argued elsewhere (2005), instead of asking the question of *what* consciousness is, we should be advised to ask *when* a mental state is conscious.<sup>1</sup> This way we would treat consciousness as

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Analogous to Nelson Goodman's replacing "what is art?" with "when is art?" question.

a process rather than a state, and instead of our tending to locate it, we might find it more useful to observe how it is realised in time and how the forms of its manifestation change. Most attempts to locate consciousness evoke the erroneous conception that it is something disembodied and mysteriously closed within the depths of privacy inaccessible not only to other minds but also to the self-observing mind. Our standard theoretical equipment of the study of consciousness in the form of ‘perspectives’ additionally emphasises the double and irreducible nature of the subjective side of the mind, according to which the reportable from the subjective (first-person) perspective is inaccessible to the scientific (third-person) perspective. One of the basic concerns of this paper is the question of how justified this insistence on the solipsist privacy of qualitative conscious states – in contrast to the so-called objectivist account of the externally observable manifestations of the same – is.

## 1. Consciousness as Perspectival

The distinctive feature of human beings that distinguishes them from other organisms is that they are “minded creatures” – living beings capable of consciousness and thought. The human mind is further marked by the uniqueness of *the way* in which ‘things in the world’ become objects of individual experience, and for which terms such as ‘perspective’ or ‘point of view’ are used.

“What the daffodil lacks and the ‘minded’ creature has is *a point of view on things* or (...) *a perspective*. The minded creature is one for which things are a certain way: the way they are from the creature’s perspective. A lump of rock has no such perspective, the daffodil has no such perspective.” (Crane, 2001: 4)

This is very much in accord with John Searle’s assumption that

“My conscious experiences, unlike the objects of experiences, are always *perspectival*. They are always *from a point of view*. But the objects themselves have no point of view. Perspective and point of view are most obvious for vision, but of course they are features of our other sensory experiences as well.” (1992: 131; emphasis added)

Subjective experience is also distinguished by the perspectival nature of consciousness:

“Subjectivity has the further consequence that all of my conscious forms of intentionality that give me information about the world independent of myself are always from a *special point of view*. The world itself has no point of view, but my access to the world through my conscious states is always *perspectival*, always *from my point of view*.” (Searle, 1992: 95, emphasis added)

“When I talk of perspectives, I do not mean that a perspective *is* a state of mind; it is meant to be a *condition* for being in the state of mind.” (Crane, 2001: 4)

This clarification is important and helps us to differentiate between two commonly confused uses of the same term. It is this other possible meaning of the term (the one referred to henceforward and pertaining to ‘perspectives’ from a person’s point of view: ‘first’, ‘second’ or ‘third’) which, it seems to me, is what we mean when we say that a perspective *is* a state of mind. And while the former takes ‘perspective’ as the mode in which objects are had in experience, the latter suggests that objects experience themselves and their accessibility to the conscious mind.

Thus, a difference should be made between experience itself (according to which consciousness is perspectival) and a, say, ‘first-person’ perspective *on* experience. It can further be claimed that the perspectival nature of conscious-

ness (in the aforesaid sense) is not limited, while the first-person methodology faces too many obstacles to be limitless.

For it is one thing to say that we have experiences (which we are born with or get to shape throughout our lives) and quite another to claim that we have them from a particular perspective. As conscious beings, we are not born with the first (or any other) ‘perspective’; it is something we get to ‘know’ and ‘learn’ as we grow as conscious beings on the one hand, and as we embark on investigating conscious states both theoretically and scientifically on the other.

## 2. The First-Person Perspective

The ‘first-person’ perspective most commonly refers to our lived experience, also defined as phenomenal experience or simply experience (Chalmers, 1996) as it appears in our consciousness from the point of view of the “I”. The philosophy of mind takes it to be synonymous with subjectivity. In order to stress the phenomenal character of experience, all that which cannot be accessed from other perspectives is granted ‘first-personness’ more often than not, whereby insufficient attention has been paid to what it can and – in particular – what it cannot convey.

A widespread fallacy is manifest in the conviction or expectation that the ‘first-person’ modus has the capacity to (almost automatically) reveal what is going on, both personally and subpersonally, in the conscious world of each person. It is believed that whenever we switch to the perspective from the “I” point of view a cognitive road is opened to unbiased subjectivity; that, in a way, it is this very immediacy that can bring us to what can be considered as the consciously ‘given’: the blueness of the sea, the cry of a baby, the whiteness of milk, the painfulness of toothache, etc. But givenness of any kind – particularly in the study of consciousness – is highly problematic. For questions such as the following arise: How do we select the ‘felt’ (what do we ignore and what do we promote as consciously dominant)?; How do we weigh the many forms of appearances (for only a minute fraction of the sensed becomes experienced)?; And particularly, how do we transcribe the latter into a reportable form?

Another theoretical means that favours unbounded susceptibility to subjectivity is that of “privileged access” to the sphere of experience. However, it is frequently used to mean more than it actually can. After all, ‘privilege’ means nothing more than *me* – and not somebody else – being in possession of particular subjective states. Animals, I would guess, are privileged in the same way; they too have their consciousness, although they lack a perspective on what it is that their privilege regards.

Theorists have incredibly high – and often also mistaken – expectations of the ‘first-person’. These high (and unrealistic) expectations issue from “privileged access”, and the naïve belief that a faithful first-person mirroring of experience (if it were possible) could teach us anything is indeed mistaken. Yet, ‘privilege’ can only mean that no one else can have access to our own subjectivity, and it does not allow for the conclusion that this privilege is limitless or that it discloses itself to us either automatically or without mediation. Moreover, an ‘ideal’ first person report (i.e. one that would be capable of an authentic and faithful representation of subjective feels) would, in fact, have zero explanatory power.

Surely no one knows better than me how I subjectively feel, but from this it does not follow either that I am the only one capable of knowing these feels

or that they can exist only within my first-person perspective. Here we encounter a paradox of some kind: although the first-person perspective is the most authentic, it is at the same time the least (explanatory) telling. Indeed, it seems to me that we are ignorant of the fact that *directness does not speak for itself*, that *immediacy can be uninformative*, that *closeness may blind us*.<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising then that what we consider to be the most intimate element of the mind turns out to be the most difficult to account for. We are generally poor observers not only of our own internal processes, but also of our qualitative states.

The elements of the idea that we appear to be “strangers to ourselves” (Wilson, 2002) can already be found in Hume when he remarks:

“When I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other (...) I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.” (1739: 252)

The elusiveness of the “I” as a self-reflecting subject is also to be found in Maurice Merleau-Ponty when he states: “The other can be evident to me because *I am not transparent for myself*...” (1945: 410; emphasis added). Recapitulating Merleau-Ponty’s view on embodied self-awareness, Dan Zahavi puts it in the following way: “I am never so close to myself (...)” (2001: 163), and also: “I am always already a stranger to myself (...)” (ibid.).

Now, although I tend to disagree with Searle’s denial of the role of introspection,<sup>3</sup> he does make a relevant point about the difficulty of self-awareness or self-observation:

“The very fact of subjectivity, which we were trying to observe, makes such an observation impossible. Why? Because where conscious subjectivity is concerned, there is no distinction between the observation and the thing observed, between the perception and the object perceived. The model of vision works on the presupposition that there is a distinction between the thing seen and the seeing of it. But for ‘introspection’ there is simply no way to make this separation. Any introspection I have of my own conscious states is itself that conscious state.” (Searle, 1992: 97)

To the question “Is there a way out?” we could imagine different possible answers, ranging from a negative one (based, essentially, on the irreducibility thesis and the assumption that there are no equivalents to the qualitative states of consciousness) to those that allow that ‘perspectives’ other than the first-person may also prove to be potent in revealing the nature of subjectivity. What the former implies is that there is neither an equivalent to the authenticity of subjectivity nor a possibility of replacing it in any way. However, it does not exclude its logical opposite, according to which a reductive (scientific) formula of consciousness is, in principle, possible (but lies entirely in the future for now).

It has become almost a commonsense notion that each person is authorised only for the ‘first-person’ perspective, and that only persons other than ourselves can act from or be apt for the ‘second’ or ‘third’ person perspectives. I think that much of this confusion has been created by a literal attribution of the ‘perspectives’ (first, second, third) to different persons, further implying that what is accessible to one point of view remains alien to another. On the contrary, I believe that one and the same cognitive subject can – and as a rule does – practice multiple perspectives. A cognitive person can switch from one to another form of ‘reading’ (even when both are irreducible) as easily as one can perceptually zoom from one to another plane of perception and adapt accordingly.

Although being shaped within an individual and particular point of view is the very nature of subjectivity, what we often miss to point out is that it is neither unanimous nor fixed, neither unchanged nor unalterable. In spite of the fact that it is limited (e.g. my point of view can never acquire a perspective on a bat's experience), it is nevertheless flexible and adaptive, and allows each of us multiple access to the conscious world we experience. It is for this reason that I do not take 'perspective' and 'point of view' as synonymous,<sup>4</sup> and claim that multiple perspectives are indeed possible from a single point of view.

The conscious "I" can do a lot more than conform exclusively to the first-person modality. In other words, nothing prevents the 'self' from being aware of one's own consciousness from perspectives other than the 'first' one. (And, as we shall see below, the same can also be said of the third-person point of view.) For instance, I can feel pain in my lower back (to which no one else has access), and I can also internalise my doctor's (third-person) report on the cause of my pain (the diagnosis may come as a relief even before treatment) and make this report partly re-shape the experiential status of my subjective state. Yet, I can also be 'hurt' in that I experience the suffering of others (caused, in an empathic way, through interaction with a 'second-person').

### 3. The Second-Person Perspective

One of the implications of philosophy having affirmed human cognition as *embodied*,<sup>5</sup> *embedded*,<sup>6</sup> *enacted*<sup>7</sup> and *extended*<sup>8</sup> is the conception that consciousness is not localised 'within the head', but immersed in the bodily apparatus that actively participates in the physical, social, cultural and other events in the world. Such consciousness is decisively open to the world of interpersonal relations. Empathy is a powerful means of establishing ties with other 'selves'<sup>9</sup> – in older views a *Mitgefühl* that emerges as a result of an imaginary (supposed) transposition of other 'selves' into the mental world, and in more recent accounts a kind of interpersonal bond made possible by a folk-psychological 'theory of mind' on the one hand, and by (a mostly affective) mimicking on the subpersonal (i.e. prereflective and preverbal) level on the other.<sup>10</sup>

2  
In another context, I have thematized this for the first time in my (1996) article.

3  
Unlike him, I would say that introspection is possible but limited in its capacity. For the nice account of the role of introspection, see Vermersch (1999).

4  
Contrary to many authors, that take them as synonymous (e.g. Crane, 2001, Ch. 2).

5  
Contrary to, for instance, 'black box' model of mind, the term 'embodiment' is used to denote biological and sensorimotor constellation as an instrument of cognitive interaction with the world.

6  
'Embedded' cognition sees the crucial role of environment or "rich real-world surroundings" (Clark, 1998) in formation of cognitive

processes. It is nowadays also extended to all other aspects of mind.

7  
Cognitive subjects are seen as agents that actively interact with surroundings and 'other minds'.

8  
Authors of the concept (Clark and Chalmers...) advocate "active externalism" based on the idea that objects in the environment play decisive role in cognitive processes, and are though put on equal footing as the internal processes.

9  
See, for instance, Thompson (1999).

10  
The latter is related to the work of V. Gallese, G. Rizzolatti, M. Arbib, A. Goldman, and others on the so called 'mirror neurons'.

If we consider the cognitive agent to be embodied and embedded and if we take empathy seriously, the problem of other minds in its radical form does not occur at all. Due to the mind's openness to the world, the first-person view is never a solipsist story told by an internalist 'self'. Or rather, the first-person experience is recognised within 'second-personness'.

"If one were confined to one's own first-person point of view, such that one had absolutely no empathic openness to others (...), and hence to how one would be experienced by others (empathy as the experience of myself as being an other for you), one would be incapable of grasping that one's own body is a physical object equivalent to the other physical things one perceives. A physical object is something that can stand before one in perception, but the living body, from an exclusively first-person point of view, cannot stand before one in this way." (Thompson, 2001: 19)

It is this "empathic openness to others" that facilitates the revision of the conception of consciousness as an entirely private event inaccessible to other minds. Not only are we mentally open to both the natural and human world that we are part of, but we also get to learn about ourselves in otherness.

Paradoxically (although in accord with the above idea that the immediacy of the first-person perspective may lack a needed cognitive distance), we get to be aware of our own embodied conscious states and in a way learn about them only through interaction with other living conscious beings, which makes one be both the subject and object of one's own conscious activity. Such empathic relations are symmetrical; mutually rather than one-sidedly projected. Or as Evan Thompson would say:

"I empathically grasp your empathic experience of me. As a result, I acquire a view of myself not simply as a physical thing, but as a physical-thing-empathically-grasped-by-you-as-a-living-being. In other words, I do not merely experience myself as a sentient being 'from within', nor grasp myself as also a physical thing in the world; I experience myself as recognizably sentient 'from without', that is, from your perspective, the perspective of another. In this way, one's sense of self-identity, even at the most fundamental levels of embodied agency, is inseparable from recognition by another, and from the ability to grasp that recognition empathically." (2001: 19–20)

Thus, empathy is a means not only of experiencing other persons' mental states, but also of grasping one's own experiences as empathically perceived by others. If empathic 'mirroring' (of both me in others and others in me) is possible, then there must be a way out of being imprisoned by the 'first-person perspective'.

#### 4. The Third-Person Perspective

Contemporary literature on consciousness quite commonly contrasts the first-person methodology with the third-person perspective in a way that hardly leaves room for the possibility of their affiliation and even less for the possibility of their interchange. The (subjectivist) first-person data are most commonly defined only in opposition to the (objectivist) third-person reports. The way in which these methodologies are conceptualised from the onset implies that any qualitative experience of the former cannot (ever) be adequately captured by a scientific investigation of the latter (behaviour, brain processes, environmental interaction, computational models). The "hard problem" of consciousness (Chalmers, 1996) makes the gap between the two unbridgeable and paves the way for irreducibility. Yet, there are also those who claim that a thoroughly empirical account of consciousness is possible (Baars, 1994). Let me try to distance myself, at least for the present purposes, from the radical

options and look for a domain in which the exclusiveness either does not hold or is inapplicable. This domain is language.

In no other domain does the formative power of language come more to the fore than perhaps in the field of consciousness. The very verbal labelling of colours,<sup>11</sup> the musical characterisation of sounds, the enologist's narrative of taste sensations, the kinaesthetic training of movement, etc... all bear witness to 'higher level' cognitive processes – as expressed in language – shaping 'lower level' sensations. Meanings make their impact all the way down to sensory experience, thus making it difficult to draw a clear dividing line between the former and the latter. Verbal interventions and narratives interfere in the very fundamental level of experience. For instance, a simple onomatopoeia can shape the way something (e.g. footsteps, a church bell, a cock, the ambulance, a jet plane) is heard. It is difficult, if not impossible, to hear pure auditory sensations, and the way we hear sounds as sounds *of* something tells us that the cognitive shapes the experiential. Is then the bedrock of sensation, of which we can say that we are conscious of as of pure sound or pure colour, conceivable at all? Are we ever truly conscious of unbiased raw feels as the advocates of qualia would like us to believe? Is there anything like a 'naked' or 'naïve' conscious mind (analogous to the eye and vision)?

Contrary to those who believe that we can be conscious of 'pure experience' (*das pure Erleben*; Metzinger, 1991) or of 'raw feels' to which we are consciously exposed in an unmediated way, this very 'nakedness' poses a problem for me and causes difficulties for my uncritical acceptance of the 'transparency' of qualitative states (this also presents problems for the first-person methodology as expounded above). Let us take the most frequent example used to illustrate qualia – the sound of a musical instrument. To say that the sound we are conscious of is the sound of a musical instrument is to admit that the experience is already culturally laden in the sense that what we firstly or immediately recognise is that the sound is produced by a device we recognise as a musical instrument, and secondly that the musical instrument in question is, for instance, a bassoon and not an oboe. (It is also possible to say that we have a conscious experience of a sound we know comes from a musical instrument, but cannot tell which). The conscious state of a person with music (instruments) in her experiential repertoire and that of a person without one must be two different subjective states. If this is so, are we not forced to conclude that instead of treating the sensorial as primary, onto which the cultural infrastructure is added, we should simply take the latter as the condition of having the former? (Yet, if we were to introduce *cultured qualia*, would we not sin against the very core idea of qualia as unmediated and unintentional sensorial qualities.)

If language (as both a form of culture and a social construct) is to be construed as the third-person methodology, then intimate reports on subjective states already bear the traits of the 'objectivist' perspective. If I am not mistaken in attributing third-personness to language (which simply means that there is no private language), then we have the elements of objectifying perspective within first-person subjectivity itself. It is true that the verbal repertoire of introspective reports is limited and vague, and that scientific language is much more precise and variegated; nevertheless, both versions can be shared by

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In many cases we have problems in attributing a 'color' to the chromatic sensation; in that case it seems that we do not know what we

are conscious of as long as we do not find the appropriate verbal label.



both types of language-users. In the medium of language “pure experience” gets shaped by what is referred to as an impure methodology or a betrayal of strict first-personness. Having said that, however, I do not suspect irreducibility, but do question the exclusiveness of perspectives.

In this regard, Francisco Varela and Jonathan Shear’s joint message is witty yet straightforward:

“(…) our stance in regards to first-person methodologies is this: don’t leave home without it, but do not forget to bring along third-person accounts as well.” (1999: 2)

However, it can hardly be the case that we can ‘forget’ what so naturally belongs to our consciousness. It is rather the other way round: it is quite difficult to see how the ‘purification’ procedures should succeed, the results of which would then be both isolated qualitative states reduced to qualia and unspoiled first-personness. The capacity to observe ourselves and our mental states is facilitated not only by introspection and other modes of first-person attitudes, but also by internalising the so-called external perspective. After all, is my having *my* third-person sense of my ‘self’ that unconceivable? Do I not observe myself as if I were a ‘self’ that I can, in a way, approach from an external perspective? Do I not articulate my subjective feels in my personal (verbal) reports that already use the form that is by no means private?

Be that as it may, within this conceptual framework subjectivity is not reducible to raw qualitative feels exclusively. On a very fundamental level experience is also moulded by the non-qualitative. This does not, however, mean that qualia do not exist. What this does mean is that qualia are not available to the conscious subject as isolated qualities, as pure colour or sound, but as something already mediated by the personal experiential history of somebody acting in the – natural, social and cultural<sup>12</sup> – world.

I guess it would be wrong to apply the ‘what-it-is-like-to-be’ case on the mental exercise required ‘to be’ in a perspective other than the first-person. Trying to guess what being a bat feels like and actually being one are not the same (because we do not possess the physical conditions to get to the qualitative states of the subjective world based on echo experience), and neither are trying to be in a third-person’s shoes and actually being a third-person (because as active persons we continually exercise all the ‘perspectives’, continually switch from one modus to another, since our biological apparatus serves us well enough to actively engage in all the perspectival roles).

I am, in this regard, in full agreement with Thompson and his claim that:

“(S)cientists rely substantially not only on subjects’ introspective reports, but also on their own first-person experience. Without relying on their own experience, scientists would not only be unable to make sense of what subjects are saying; they would also be unable to grasp what cognitive phenomena are.” (2007: 311)

This amounts to the conviction that, much like the way in which the ‘first-person’ has the capacity to make sense of third-person strategies, there are sufficient reasons for the support of the belief that an objectivist’s perspective on the latter cannot really be operational without her having possession of the experiential know-how of the former.

Unlike in philosophical literature on consciousness, which, generally speaking, strictly keeps the perspectives apart, thus underlining the insistence on their irreducibility, in the mental worlds of people as conscious beings all the perspectives coexist and are regularly practiced in their daily lives. The cracks created by theorists are ignored by the conscious subjects that these theorists investigate.

This does not, however, mean that there is a common denominator for the different modalities. Indeed, the perspectives can neither be *reduced* to one another nor experienced simultaneously – what they can be is *related*. Each is authentic in its own terms, although each is a description of a conscious mode *open to* other possible descriptions. *Irreducibility*, after all, implies neither *incommensurability* nor *incomparability*. (Drawing a parallel with Kuhnian paradigm is not out of place here; ‘perspectives’ may, indeed, be taken to be parallel to his paradigms. The critical remark that, although incommensurable, paradigms are not incomparable is also valid of perspectives: regardless of how different they are, they can be mutually related, compared and eventually complemented.)

## 5. Heterophenomenology

Can what Daniel Dennett baptised as ‘heterophenomenology’ offer a new or alternative approach to (or a new kind of ‘perspective’ on) consciousness and its study? As opposed to classical phenomenology (he calls ‘autophenomenology’), which is concerned with introspecting the subjective inner world (as expounded by Husserl and Wundt, for instance), heterophenomenology focuses on verbal reports expressing beliefs about one’s own conscious states and the way they appear to one (thus replacing subpersonal ‘raw data’ with personal ‘interpreted data’), which then serve as the primary basis for the objectivist ‘third-person’ account, also testable at the level of brain processes. As is often said, this is the phenomenology not of oneself but of the other-self.

Dennett defines the method as “a bridge – *the* bridge – between the subjectivity of human consciousness and the natural sciences” (2007: 249) that may be perceived as an attempt

“... leading from objective physical science and its insistence on the third-person point of view, to a method of phenomenological description that can (in principle) do justice to the most private and ineffable subjective experiences, while never abandoning the methodological scruples of science.” (1991: 72)

In that it aims at a totality of relevant – both phenomenal and empirical – data, the methodology appears to be promising in respect of its hetero-perspectival approach:

“The total set of details of heterophenomenology, plus all the data we can gather about concurrent events in the brains of subjects and in the surrounding environment, comprise the total data set for a theory of human consciousness. It leaves out no objective phenomena and no subjective phenomena of consciousness.” (2003: 20)

Now, although the bridge metaphor used by Dennett in illustrating his method suggests a balanced and roughly symmetrical relation between the two sides, and although the author of heterophenomenology declaratively insists on taking (first-person) subjectivity as seriously as possible, it soon becomes clear that for Dennett both the aim and ideal of studying consciousness is the (third-person) objectivist methodology – the same one that proved successful in providing us with scientifically grounded knowledge of, say, meteors or

magnets (2003). It follows that, as an object of scientific inquiry, consciousness is in no significant way different from all the other objects of scientific research. However (probably in order to ease the third-person point of view), he reduces the realm of the subjective to *beliefs* that individuals have about their conscious experience. Dennett does not doubt that beliefs, as expressed in verbal reports, are the “fine window into the subject’s subjectivity” (2003: 22). Moreover, what he takes and treats as primary data is not raw, uninterpreted, preverbal experience but a “catalogue of beliefs”.

In addition, the objectivity involved in the study of consciousness is, with respect to heterophenomenology and according to Dennett, characteristically marked by *neutrality*.

“The heterophenomenological method neither challenges nor accepts as entirely true the assertions of subjects, but rather maintains a constructive and sympathetic **neutrality**, in the hopes of compiling a *definitive* description of the world according to the subjects.” (Dennett, 1991: 83; emphasis by Z.R.)

Maximally extended – he continues – the heterophenomenological world “is a **neutral portrayal** of exactly *what it is like to be* that subject – in the subject’s own terms, given the best interpretation we can master.” (1991: 98; emphasis by Z.R.) Such a “tactic of neutrality” is believed to facilitate the empirically based science of consciousness (83).

Dennett’s conception of heterophenomenology has been widely discussed, and the questions that it raises are not only manifold but also provocative. Yet, for my present purposes, I shall only briefly comment on the *neutrality* of the heterophenomenological methodology because it seems to be an aspect that comes closest to the issue at hand concerned with the *possibility* of building perspectives on consciousness. Neither Max Velmans (2001) nor Evan Thompson (2007) are convinced of the neutrality of the heterophenomenological approach. Velmans finds a number of reasons to consider heterophenomenologists to be sceptical rather than neutral, and Thompson’s reasons for disbelieving the ‘neutrality’ of this method are roughly as follows: because heterophenomenology relies on *interpretation* and *interpersonal* relations, it can neither be neutral nor can it actually fully conform to the purely third-person perspective.

Ambitiously launched to aid the study of consciousness implementing a scientifically based methodology, heterophenomenology obviously offers its critics sufficient grounds for disbelieving that it can successfully achieve what it promises. Here is a brief selection of these reasons: First, the heterophenomenological methodology is, in many respects, identical to that of the ordinary cognitive science,<sup>13</sup> and it is difficult to see what is phenomenological in it and why it is called a ‘phenomenology’ at all. Second, the beliefs that a person has about her own conscious states can hardly serve as the bedrock of scientific inquiry into consciousness. Third, if one is ‘unauthoritative’ concerning one’s own consciousness, then this can mean that this ‘unauthoritativeness’ must be reflected on one’s beliefs (which additionally nourishes the ‘scepticism’) on the one hand, and that ‘third-person’ observers, I assume, cannot be exempt from this lack of authority either on the other (a dilemma should be posed here at least in the form of a rhetorical question: how can the initial lack of authority over one’s own consciousness ever be escaped or compensated for in the course of a heterophenomenological investigation?) Fourth, heterophenomenology runs the risk (evident in behaviourism) of allowing that the observer’s competence allows for insight into the minds of others and not one’s own.<sup>14</sup>

## 6. Intersubjective Perspective

Where we arrive at in the study of consciousness depends largely on what we start with. If we start with qualia and the ambition to find adequate forms of representation of the same, our ‘perspective’ will be adjusted accordingly, in an approach that cannot be but closed within an internal subjective world. If, on the other hand, we treat the conscious subject as open to intersubjective relations, our ‘perspective’ has to be chosen and appropriately accommodated.

To choose the latter over the former does not mean that qualia have to be eliminated (which is impossible anyway), but that they are to be placed within a different context. “How it feels” then ceases to be a matter of solipsist conscious existence and becomes a matter of intersubjective interchange instead. What seems to be the most intimate part of our ‘self’, i.e. consciousness, consciously discloses itself on the interpersonal level.

If one possible lesson from the above is that there is no immediate path to the conscious “I”, as is commonly assumed or taken for granted, another one could be that the authentic form in which the conscious self is realised is intersubjectivity (some elements of which we have already discovered within the second-person approach). An adequate perspective in this case proves to be *intersubjective* rather than *intrasubjective* (as in the case of the first-person mode). An important point in this respect is brought by Varela and Shear:

“(…) dealing with subjective phenomena is not the same as dealing with purely private experiences, as is often assumed. The subjective is intrinsically open to intersubjective validation (…).” (1999: 2)

That subjectivity is not solipsist and isomorphic but always immersed in the social world where our ‘self’ and other ‘selves’ interact is formulated by Dan Zahavi in a straightforward manner:

“(…) subjectivity and intersubjectivity are in fact complementing and mutually interdependent notions. Thus, the introduction of intersubjectivity should by no means be taken to imply a refutation of the philosophy of subjectivity.” (1999: 166)

Indeed, intersubjectivity is to be taken as a medium in which subjectivity is realised, and phenomenology has a lot to say about this.

“The subjectivity that is related to the world gains its full relation to itself, and to the world, only in relation to others, that is, in intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity exists and develops only in relation between world-related subjects, and the world is brought to articulation only in the relation between subjects.” (Zahavi, 2005: 176–7)

By its very nature, intersubjectivity is not examinable from any single perspective, which leads both to the conclusion that any appropriate methodology should combine all available options, and to the suggestion that eventually a new notion of *interpersonal perspective* could be introduced to account for the intersubjective character of consciousness. The above has answered the dilemma whether we are capable of dealing with multiple perspectives. It can now only be confirmed that conscious subjects are not specialised in one or

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Dennett himself states that “heterophenomenology is nothing new; it is nothing other than the method that has been used by psychophysicists, cognitive psychologists, clinical neuropsychologists...”. (2003: 22)

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It is difficult at this point not to recall a number of ironical remarks on the account of behaviorism; one such is: First behaviorist to second behaviorist just after making love: “It was great for you, how was it for me?” (Searle, 1992: 35)

the other approach, and that we change perspectives with skill throughout our daily lives, but are obviously reluctant to admit it in our theories.

Each conscious self is mentally equipped to apply and practice different perspectives on one's own subjectivity. Even the irreducibility of subjectivity is no obstacle to the constant interplay of ever-changing perspectives from the one point of view that all conscious subjects continually exercise. Moreover, the way we go about our own subjectivity is not confined to the 'perspectives' that theorists impose on the conscious minds they investigate.

## 7. Consequences and Conclusions

One of the underlying conclusions of the above is that one should quit the naïve belief that any methodology in the science of consciousness is there to *replace* the (mysterious) object of its consideration. The expectations of the 'first-person' approach to mimic the qualitative conscious states as faithfully as possible are exceptionally high, and prove to be a complicated mission difficult to accomplish. Since the 'perspectives', I assume, are not designed to mirror but to describe and eventually explain, the theoretical aim cannot resemble faithful re-productions of conscious states at all. Much like the way things stand in a painter's picturing of the visible world, in the 'picturing' of consciousness it is also impossible to achieve the faithfulness expected. In both cases, faithfulness (e.g. the equivalent of 'redness') is neither possible nor required since it could bring about nothing but duplication which has no explanatory power whatsoever.

Although no one denies the 'privilege' and authenticity of the first-person perspective, we must be aware of its limitations. Closeness is not necessarily revealing, and immediacy might prove to be impotent; it may only blind us and make us look for our own experiences in the 'external' – both natural and human – world, with which we uninterruptedly interact. The intimacy of subjectivity might then disclose itself in the world of intersubjectivity. This, in turn, might initiate a shift from the privacy of qualitative states to a more communal (empathic, social) character of consciousness, including that of science. Accordingly, regardless of which point of view one takes, it must also be open to other persons' methodologies.

This neither disavows nor weakens the irreducibility thesis; this simply disallows the thesis to 'have the last word'. For, in spite of irreducibility (and incommensurability), different versions of reports on conscious processes, containing descriptions and explanations as formulated in terms of 'perspectives', can be *communicated* beyond the demarcation line dividing the 'first' from both the 'second' and the 'third' person methodologies. Moreover, they can also be *compared*. *Irreducibility does not imply incomparability*. It is true that (much like in the duck-rabbit picture) one cannot be within two perspectives simultaneously. However, it is also true that one can switch from one to another, relate, compare and complement them, and even appreciate their differences.

It is true that everything we are conscious of is experienced from a particular (singular) *point of view*, but it is also true that this 'point' is not stable, fixed or unchanging, and that it is capable of naturally practicing *different 'perspectives'*. In other words, without having to part from our bodies to come into possession of the 'second' or 'third' person perspectives, we can rely on our embodied and embedded minds that are perfectly apt to flexibly interchange cognitive strategies, an interchange manifesting itself in multiple possible perspectives on our subjective worlds.

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Zdravko Radman

## Das Bewusstsein: Perspektivenprobleme

### **Zusammenfassung**

*Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit einigen falschen Auffassungen in Bezug auf 'privilegierte' (zugleich aber auch 'mysteriöse') Zugänge zu eigenen Erfahrungen aus der Perspektive der ersten Person, verweist auf die Grenzen solcher Unmittelbarkeit und zweifelt am solipsistischen Geheimnis der Subjektivität. Ausgehend von der Überzeugung, dass sich die Gleichstellung von 'Blickwinkel' und 'Perspektive' als problematisch erwiesen hat, stellt der Verfasser die These auf, dass wir unterschiedliche Perspektiven aus ein und demselben (persönlichen) Blickwinkel haben können. Als gestaltgewordene, in die Umwelt eingebettete und erkenntnisfähige Personen praktizieren wir den Austausch perspektivistischer Standpunkte über die eigene Subjektivität in unserem Lebensalltag leichter und öfter, als wir dies in unseren Theorien zuzugeben bereit sind. Die Art der Methodologie, zu der auch der objektivistische Zugang der dritten Person gehört, ist außerstande, die Irreduktibilität zwischen dem Subjektiven und dem Empirischen zu revidieren, setzt jedoch voraus, dass die Vernunft dem intersubjektiven Raum geöffnet ist, in dem das Irreduktible immer noch weitervermittelt, verglichen und ergänzt werden kann.*

### **Schlüsselbegriffe**

Bewusstsein, Blickwinkel, Perspektive der ersten/zweiten/dritten Person, Subjektivität, Heterophänomenologie, Intersubjektivität

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## Conscience : le problème des perspectives

### **Résumé**

*L'article traite de certaines conceptions erronées liées à des approches « privilégiées » – et en même temps mystérieuses – des expériences autonomes à la première personne. Il souligne les limites d'une telle immédiateté et doute de l'intimité solipsiste de la subjectivité. En partant de la conviction selon laquelle l'identification du « point de vue » et de la « perspective » reste problématique, l'auteur affirme que nous pouvons avoir des perspectives différentes d'un même personnel point de vue personnel. En tant que personnes incarnées, intégrées et cognitives, nous pratiquons l'échange des attitudes perspektivistes face à notre propre subjectivité plus souvent et plus facilement dans notre quotidien que nous ne soyons prêts à l'admettre en théorie. La méthodologie qui correspond en partie à l'approche objectiviste de la troisième personne n'est pas en mesure de reconsidérer l'irréductibilité du subjectif et de l'empirique. Elle demande cependant un esprit ouvert à l'espace intersubjectif dans lequel l'irréductible peut encore se communiquer, se comparer et se compléter.*

### **Mots-clés**

conscience, point de vue, perspective de la première/seconde/troisième personne, subjectivité, hétérophénoménologie, intersubjectivité