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The Mysterious Disappearance of Consciousness

What makes materialists deny the undeniable?



9th January 2020



Bernardo Kastrup | Dutch computer scientist and philosopher who has published fundamental theoretical reflections on the mind matter problem.

2,226 words

Phenomenal consciousness is seen as one of the top unsolved problems in science. Nothing we can—or, arguably, even could—observe about the arrangement of atoms constituting the brain allows us to deduce what it feels like to smell an orange, fall in love, or have a belly ache. Remarkably, the intractability of the problem has led some to even claim that consciousness doesn't exist at all: Daniel Dennett and his followers famously argue that it is an illusion,

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whereas neuroscientist Michael Graziano proclaims that “consciousness doesn’t happen. It is a mistaken construct.” Really?

The denial of phenomenal consciousness is called—depending on its particular formulation—‘eliminativism’ or ‘illusionism.’ Its sheer absurdity has recently been chronicled by [Galen Strawson](#), [David Bentley Hart](#) and [yours truly](#), so I won’t repeat that argumentation here. My interest now is different: I want to *understand* what makes the consciousness of an intelligent human being deny its own existence with a straight face. For I find this denial extremely puzzling for both philosophical and psychological reasons.

What kind of conscious inner dialogue do people engage in so as to convince themselves that they have no conscious inner dialogue?

Don’t get me wrong, the motivation behind the denial is obvious enough: it is to tackle a vexing problem by magically wishing it out of existence. As a matter of fact, the ‘whoa-factor’ of this magic gets eliminativists and illusionists a lot of media attention. But still, what kind of conscious inner dialogue do these people engage in so as to convince themselves that they have no conscious inner dialogue? Short of assuming that they are insane, fantastically stupid or dishonest—none of which is plausible—we have an authentic and rather baffling mystery in our hands.

The only way to go about elucidating the mystery is to investigate, with patience and an open mind, the arguments offered by eliminativists and illusionists. The cover story of last September’s issue of *New Scientist*, for instance, sensationally announced the discovery of the “[True nature of consciousness: Solving the biggest mystery of your mind](#)” based on an essay by Michael Graziano. In it, Graziano argues—predictably—that consciousness doesn’t actually exist.

He starts the essay by defining his usage of the term ‘consciousness’: “it isn’t just the stuff in your head. It is the *subjective experience* of some of that stuff” (emphasis added). Clearly, thus, Graziano is talking

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about *phenomenal* consciousness, not [the other technical usages of the term](#). Phenomenal consciousness entails the *subjective experiences* that seem to accompany the material stuff going on in your head. So Graziano’s challenge is to persuade you that, despite all appearances to the contrary, *those experiences don’t actually exist*.

His argument rests on the idea that consciousness is adaptive: it is undoubtedly beneficial to us to recognize and understand ourselves as agents in our environment —i.e. to have a model of ourselves—if we are to survive. In this context, Graziano argues that consciousness is merely *a model the brain constructs of itself*, so it can “monitor and control itself”.

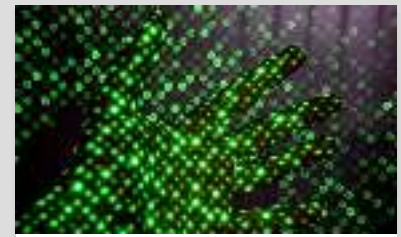
Consciousness seems immaterial—his argument goes —simply because, in order to focus attention on survival-relevant tasks, the model fails to incorporate superfluous details of brain anatomy and physiology. In Graziano’s words, “the brain describes a simplified version of itself, then reports this as a ghostly, non-physical essence.”

This is all very reasonable. The problem is that *it has nothing to do with phenomenal consciousness*. Graziano’s authoritative prose disguises a sleight of hand: he implicitly changes the meaning he attributes to the term ‘consciousness’ as he develops the argument. He starts by talking about subjective experience—i.e. *phenomenal* consciousness, which is what science can’t explain—just to end up explaining something else entirely: our ability to cognize ourselves as agents and metacognitively represent our own mental contents.

What it feels like to lift a heavy bag, have your tongue burned by hot tea or hit your head against a wall isn’t “ethereal” at all (try the wall if you doubt me).

If anything, Graziano’s argument *presupposes* phenomenal consciousness: once raw experience is assumed to be in place, then—and only then—does his argument help us understand how such experience can be configured so as to enable reflective introspection

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and a felt sense of self.

What Graziano describes as a “ghostly” or “ethereal essence”—and then proceeds to explain away in terms of brain function—is merely a colloquial understanding of consciousness, one that regards it as something akin to a ‘soul.’ This, of course, isn’t the technical issue in contention; it isn’t what is meant by phenomenal consciousness. What it feels like to lift a heavy bag, have your tongue burned by hot tea or hit your head against a wall isn’t “ethereal” at all (try the wall if you doubt me). There is remarkably little in Graziano’s argument to justify the rather ambitious title of his essay.

Also last year, Keith Frankish—an illusionist—published [an essay on Aeon](#) making the case that consciousness is, well, an illusion. Never mind the fact that illusions are experiential and therefore presuppose consciousness; the subtitle of his essay—“*Phenomenal* consciousness is a fiction written by our brains” (emphasis added)—gave me hope that he would face the core issue head-on, instead of throwing a smokescreen of conceptual obfuscation.

Disappointingly, however, Frankish already starts out by conflating science with the metaphysics of materialism and then weaving a blatantly circular argument:

“It is phenomenal consciousness that I believe is illusory. For science finds nothing qualitative in our brains, any more than in the world outside. The atoms in your brain aren’t coloured and they don’t compose a colourful inner image.”

The argument structure here is the following:

1. Material things, in themselves, have no qualitative properties (like color, flavor, etc.), only our perceptions of them do;
2. The brain is a material thing;
3. From (1) and (2), the brain has no qualitative properties;
4. Experience is reducible to the brain;
5. From (3) and (4), experience cannot entail qualitative properties.



Universe

Ergo, phenomenal consciousness *cannot* exist; it *must*, instead, be an illusion—or so his argument goes.

Notice, however, that step (4) blatantly begs the question: it *presupposes* materialism, which is precisely the metaphysical point in contention. Ironically, what Frankish actually accomplishes is to highlight an implication of materialism that reduces it to absurdity.

His next point—the core of his case—doesn't fare much better. He explains:

“it is useful to us to have an overview or ‘edited digest’ (Dennett’s phrase) of [our brain] processes—a sense of the overall shape of our complex, dynamic interaction with the world. When we speak of what our experiences are like, we are referring to this sense, this edited digest.”

His point is that, when we introspect, what we experience isn't our brain processes as they are in themselves, but an inaccurate, distorted, “edited digest” thereof. This is the basis of Frankish's claim that experiences are illusions: they are *misportrayals* of what they represent, misrepresentations of material brain states. That's why—the argument goes—a belly ache feels nothing like networks of firing neurons inside our head, even though the latter is supposedly what the ache actually is.

No amount of material indirection can make material states seem experiential, just as no number of extra speakers can make a stereo seem like a television: the two domains are just *incommensurable*.

Misportrayals as they may be, since Frankish's basic premise is that only material states exist, these 'edited digests' *must themselves consist of material brain states as well*—what else? And thus, infinite regress is upon us: since the brain states corresponding to the misportrayals feel nothing like networks of firing neurons, they must themselves be misrepresented by some meta-introspective system.

But alas, the resulting meta-misportrayals also

necessarily consist of material brain states, so we need a meta-meta-introspective system that misportrays the misportrayals of the misportrayals, and so on. No amount of material indirection can make material states seem experiential, just as no number of extra speakers can make a stereo seem like a television: the two domains are just *incommensurable*. All Frankish accomplishes is to conceptually postpone the inevitable confrontation with the actual problem at hand.

To his credit, Frankish does explicitly address the obvious objection against illusionism: that the properties of experience—colour, flavour, etc.—cannot be illusions, for illusions themselves entail experiential properties. Here is the passage wherein he tries to tackle this objection (don't worry if you find the prose difficult to understand; I simplify it below):

“Properties of experiences themselves cannot be illusory in the sense described, but they can be illusory in a very similar one. When illusionists say that phenomenal properties are illusory, they mean that we have introspective representations like those that we would have if our experiences had phenomenal properties. And we can have such representations even if our experiences don't have phenomenal properties. Of course, this assumes that the representations themselves don't have phenomenal properties. But, as I noted, representations needn't possess the properties they represent.”

What he is saying is that, whether we have actual experiences—phenomenal properties—or not, everything can happen as if we had them. However, this succumbs to the exact same objection it was meant to rebut: for things to happen *as if* we had experiences, it must *seem* to us that we do have experiences, even if we don't.

But Good Lord, *the 'seeming' is already an experience in and of itself*. The introspective representations must themselves be experiential, otherwise there would be no 'seeming', no illusion. Frankish is tying himself up in tortuous conceptual knots in his attempt to abstract the concreteness of experience away.

Bewilderingly to me, he then makes a remarkable

admission: “But how does a brain state represent a phenomenal property? This is a tough question.” Well, this is the *only* salient question, isn’t it? And Frankish’s entire case rests on the answer. He continues:

“I think the answer should focus on the state’s effects. A brain state represents a certain property if it causes thoughts and reactions that would be appropriate if the property were present.”

This blatantly begs the question again. Only under the assumptions of eliminativism or illusionism do effects sufficiently account for the question Frankish is leaving open. What defines experience is precisely that, *regardless of its effects*, there is something it is like to have it.

While acknowledging that he faces an explanatory challenge, Frankish suggests that *all* metaphysics face the same challenge:

“it is not only illusionists who must address this problem. The notion of mental representation is a central one in modern cognitive science, and explaining how the brain represents things is a task on which all sides are engaged.”

I regard this as outright misdirection. Yes, the mechanisms of mental representation in general aren’t fully understood, but *that’s not the salient issue here*. What is salient is this: *only illusionists have to account for the experience of ‘seeming’—i.e. illusion—while denying experience to begin with*. That’s the point, not mental representation in general.

The mind-bogglingly extraordinary claim that consciousness—the carrier of all our knowledge, the *one* thing we can be sure of—doesn’t exist requires rather extraordinary substantiation.

It is, of course, conceivable that I’ve failed to properly grasp what Frankish and Graziano are trying to say. But if someone with my background can’t understand the arguments they make in non-academic publications meant for the general public, I don’t think the burden is

on me to make the next move in the debate.

The mind-bogglingly extraordinary claim that consciousness—the carrier of all our knowledge, the *one* thing we can be sure of—doesn't exist requires rather extraordinary substantiation. Otherwise, it is legitimate to conclude that eliminativism and illusionism are precisely what they seem to be: nonsense.

If Frankish and Graziano's arguments are based on question-begging, conceptual obfuscation and sleights of hand, where does this leave us regarding the mystery I originally set out to elucidate?

My present opinion is that illusionists and eliminativists are sincere, but also so fanatically committed to a particular metaphysics—materialism—that they inadvertently conjure up, and then tie themselves in, perplexing webs of conceptual indirection, ultimately deceiving themselves. In their inner dialogue, I suspect they implicitly replace the obvious meaning of the term 'consciousness' with one or another secret conceptual abstraction, and then strive towards proving that such abstraction doesn't actually exist. Well, guess what? Of course it doesn't!

They defer tackling the salient questions with layer upon layer of smoke and mirrors just to admit, at the very end, that the questions haven't actually been addressed. However, by adding and then wrestling with all those artificial in-between layers, they get the impression that progress has been made, only one step being left at the end.

But in fact nothing has been accomplished, nothing at all. The 'problems' they solve aren't real problems to begin with, just conjured-up artifacts of conceptual fog. There is nothing of any substance or relevance prior to the "tough question" of "how does a brain state represent a phenomenal property" if experience—as they allege—doesn't exist.

Despite all this, here we are, discussing eliminativism and illusionism because—bewilderingly—these views have acquired a degree of academic respectability. Such is the state in which we find Western philosophy. What would Parmenides and Plato have thought of it?

More gravely, what will future generations think?

The Institute of Art and Ideas offered the two individuals referenced in this article the opportunity to respond to Bernardo Kastrup's argument. Both were eager to do so. Michael Graziano's response can be found [here](#), and Keith Frankish's will be published soon.

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Bernardo Kastrup will be appearing in [The Limits of Material](#) discussing consciousness and idealism.

Bernardo Kastrup
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William Braddell

20 January 2020

Excuse the typos in my debunking of Logan Leatherman's comment, this site could really do with an edit function for comments.

William Braddell

20 January 2020

"Considering that modern cognitive neuroscience has essentially affirmed that the mind, in all its mysterious complexity, is contingent upon the material brain, I find it odd that philosophers such as this author here crow so vehemently against materialism. It's almost as if they know that the days of philosophy in terms of meta-this-and-that babble are numbered, and they're desperately trying to cling to these terms and ideas they hold so dear, lest their world views be shattered. Without an actual sound foundation, all armchair philosophy like this is just conjecture, which is why William James famously said, "There is only one thing a philosopher can be counted upon to do, and that is to contradict other philosophers."

Aside from the delightful irony of you citing William James when he vehemently disagreed with your view on the brain as producer of conscious, what I suspect you are referring to when you make this claim that neuroscience have proven materialism true is that really that it has shown a strong correlation between mental states and brain states. This doesn't prove that the brain is the producer of consciousness, merely a filter for it and the fact that materialists don't realize that non-materialists have had models for reconciling this for decades proves how ignorant they are on the subject:

<https://www.newdualism.org/papers/C.Carter/Carter-Does-consciousness.htm>

Aside from that, we have decades of positive replications in the realm of parapsychology and hundreds if not thousands of NDE reports with corroborated veridical content to show that the materialist paradigm is false. In reality, the exact opposite of what you claim is true, it isn't the view of the fundamental nature of consciousness itself that is on it's last legs, it's materialism that is dying a steady death.

Jon Walker

18 January 2020

It's all unconscious. Consciousness does not exist unless it breaks through the walls of unconsciousness. But is it brain required for the unconscious processes? If you have no brain, can you have awareness? Can we know without brain? Is it materialism a precondition to knowing? What is knowing and how do we define it? Do feeling counts as knowing? What is it's relationship with thinking? Where does the "Eureka" moment come from when a new knowledge/insight is suddenly realised? Do we need to be aware and conscious to have those moments or they just appear out of thin air, unintentionally?

If thinking has nothing to do with consciousness then we maybe have no consciousness. But if the later is required for reasoning and thinking, then it's strange to consider it's non existance. Just some thoughts!!!!

Alazae Dickson

18 January 2020

I hear of a dov being helped more with consciousness then humans just all this energy thats goes into helping a dog be conscious is taking away alot of consciousness in general trying to make an animal smarter then a human people should really be ashamed

Jeff Wunder

16 January 2020

That's what happens when you trust science above all else. If consciousness can't be scientifically observed, even in principle, it can't be real. It must be an illusion. So none of this is actually happening, and you are deluded. But one wonders how consciousness can be an illusion when its contents -- such as science and logic -- are not

Logan Leatherman

16 January 2020

Considering that modern cognitive neuroscience has essentially affirmed that the mind, in all its mysterious complexity, is contingent upon the material brain, I find it odd that philosophers such as this author here crow so vehemently against materialism. It's almost as if they know that the days of philosophy in terms of meta-this-and-that babble are numbered, and they're desperately trying to cling to these terms and ideas they hold so dear, lest their world views be shattered. Without an actual sound foundation, all armchair philosophy like this is just conjecture, which is why William James famously said,

“There is only one thing a philosopher can be counted upon to do, and that is to contradict other philosophers.”

Brian Jones 1

16 January 2020

Oddly enough, it was Dennett himself that coined the term "Cartesian materialism". (Or was it "materialist dualism"? Something like that.) I distinctly remember serious neuroscientists like Baars tying themselves in their own knots in order to avoid the withering stare of old Krampus.

Descartes liked his hierarchies just fine. We, on the other hand, have become uncomfortable with them (heh, I wonder why). It's either face the reality or spend our

time desperately denying it in a constantly accelerating death spiral.



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