

# The urge for explanation

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## A meta-philosophical reflection on debates on consciousness

submitted by

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# **Disclaimer on gender specific language**

For convenience and readability purposes, I mainly use masculine pronouns in this paper (which are my own). Naturally, all genders are addressed.

# 1 Introduction

What is consciousness? This question lies at the heart of the discussions in a subfield of philosophy called philosophy of mind. Moreover, this question is connected to the more general discussions about the nature of the universe (metaphysics) as well as to more specific debates about “the hard problem of consciousness” (Chalmers, 2017) denoting the difficulty to explain subjective experience in terms of a reductive, physicalist (externalist) worldview. Generally, it can be noted that there are many different positions about the nature of consciousness, the external world, and their interrelation. From monistic approaches such as physicalism, or idealism, over dualistic approaches in the tradition of René Descartes to modern, non-reductive attempts, such as neutral monism or dual-aspect theory with all their corresponding subdifferentiations one is tempted to think that there are as many theories as there are philosophers thinking and writing about the issue of consciousness. Naturally, every philosopher is convinced that his theory is the best to explain consciousness and subsequently debates can become fiercely and are ongoing for decades, if not centuries (when we look at this philosophical debate over the course of history). I do not intend to add my personal theory about what consciousness is to this debate (at least not in a direct way). Rather, I intend to reflect philosophically upon the debate itself, upon why we want to explain consciousness in the first place and why people debate so fiercely over this topic. This shall be the aim of this essay: To reflect upon our own urge for explanation, especially for explanation of consciousness and self. My finding is that we can identify fundamentally different motivations out of which the philosophical question of consciousness and self can be raised, i.e. two fundamental stances towards life as such. This insight has drastic consequences for how we deal with questions and debates in philosophy and even how we understand philosophy as such. Thereby this essay can be best understood as a piece of meta-philosophy, of philosophical reflection about philosophy itself.

For the purpose of understanding, I will guide through this essay using naturally arising questions imitating my own sequence of thought processes. I hope that this will allow my reader to follow my thoughts most easily.

## 2 Discussion

To start our investigation why philosophers want to explain consciousness, we first have to establish a basic understanding of what an explanation is. Looking at the present literature in philosophy of science on the topic of explanation, we naturally do not find an ultimate definition of explanation. For this essay, I will therefore go with Peter Lipton (2001) in his essay “What is an explanation good for?” and start with the idea that an explanation entails information about the causes of an event in question. Lipton particularly stresses the feature of an explanatory cause to make a decisive difference to whether or not an event would have happened. If a supposed cause would not make a difference to whether the event in question would arise, then it cannot be seen as real cause, it cannot be used as causal explanation. With that in mind we shall investigate why we are so interested in gaining explanations and why we discuss so heavily about them.

The difference aspect of an explanatory cause mentioned above is additionally important because an understanding of causes does not only stand in the void of intellectual pursuit but connects to real life application. When we ask for an explanation, we essentially want to understand the corresponding cause-and-effect relationship so that we can make use of it. We want to understand the causes to be able to manipulate them and to thereby be able to change the outcome. Essentially, we want to be able to change what is. Explanation and thus an understanding of cause-and-effect relationships give us a notion of control over what happens, they are instrumental in the sense that they are our instruments of control.

This gain of control is the initial (and common) motivation behind our quest for explanation. Nevertheless, there is at least one other motivation I can think of, but will save for later as it emerges from a very different fundamental stance towards reality.

We have seen now that we usually aim at establishing a notion of control when we ask for an explanation of something. But why do we want control? Why do we want to change outcomes, change reality?

The intention to have control over something in order to change it is only actually useful when we do not like the current state of affairs. If we would like reality as it is, why would we want to change it? So, at the heart of the pursuit of control lies a deep dissatisfaction about reality, a notion of non-acceptance and of rejection of reality as it is. But why would

we reject reality? Should we as philosophers not be the people most interested in an unembellished look at reality?

To answer this question, I want to remind my reader that the topic of this essay is the attempt of explanation in the context of consciousness. Thus, to be more precise, we would have to rephrase our question into: Why would we reject *consciousness* as it is?

And at this point we face a problem. The question above naturally leads us to discuss what consciousness is, which is particularly the content of the debate I am discussing on a meta-level in this essay. My next argumentative step is thus built on shaky grounds, but I will nevertheless proceed with my argumentation doing so as I think the consequences of this step open a worthwhile perspective on the whole debate and philosophy as such. Furthermore, especially with the investigation-evading subject of consciousness there are good reasons to not blindly dismiss my approach here. My bold step is simply to equate consciousness with one's *self*. Our updated question therefore is: Why would we reject our self as it is? By this simple switch from consciousness to self the question instantly gains a much more personal, even psychological touch.

Because the equalization of consciousness to self will surely and rightly cause resistance in my reader, I want to shortly discuss some good reasons to go with it. First of all, it is self-evident that consciousness is a subjective and personal phenomenon. When we talk about consciousness, we talk about it from our own perspective, our own experience. From which perspective could we talk about it if not from our own? Everyone only knows their own consciousness. Moreover, only beings, such as humans, which live from a subjective perspective, exhibit what we call consciousness. Consciousness is a subjective experience. It is embedded inside our subjectivity. Subjectivity is itself part of our self. When we talk about subjects, we talk about ourselves, we talk about beings with a self. Therefore, we could say that consciousness is at least a subphenomenon of the self (even if it were not identical to it) and thereby clearly related to it and bound by it. If one were to reject one's self, then one is also forced to reject consciousness as (his) subjective experience. Thus, when discussing the issue of self, we look even deeper than consciousness, into the very space it arises from. We can understand phenomena at the level of consciousness by understanding the causes at the deeper level of self that give rise to it. At the same time, because of this relation, the way people deal with consciousness and try to explain it is telling about how

they deal with their own self. In discussing the issue of self, we include the discussion about the issue of consciousness or at least learn a great deal about it.

For the sake of this essay, let us suppose that my short justification above for switching our focus of investigation towards the issue of self was convincing and thus proceed with the question why it is that we would reject our self as it is.

Rejection is a form of non-acceptance, a psychological resistance to its object. And the only reason to not accept our self that I could think of is because we are afraid that we are essentially bad (or unlovable) deep down. If it were not so, why would we reject something that we believe to be essentially good? On the other side, if we believe that we are (or might be) essentially bad, it makes sense to resist the acceptance of that 'fact' by trying to change reality using our knowledge of cause-and-effect relationships. This phenomenon resembles a child hiding his eyes behind his hands to prevent himself from seeing something awful. The expectation of a lovable, beautiful object lets us open our eyes widely to experience it in every facet; the expectation of something bad or painful lets us shy away from confronting it. Fearing a painful reality, we avoid it by putting ourselves into a position of power and control. The attempt to avoid any immediate contact with our self which could lead to the suspected pain, creates a psychological distance between us and our self. Eventually this distancing leads to the denial of the very existence of our self. Self-denial is thus a natural consequence of our expectation that our self might be something bad or unlovable and thus painful to experience.

Seeing it through this lens, it becomes understandable why philosophical debates about the nature of consciousness (or self) are often so acrimonious. The theories discussed are attempts of pain-avoidance. When these concepts are criticized, we sense the dawning danger of a loss of control and fear the pain that we might have to face consequently. People become hot-headed and combative when they are afraid. The debates about consciousness get so heated because they are a matter of fear and pain.

## **2.1 Another stance towards life**

Does this mean that all philosophy, all attempts to understand reality (or self) and its causal relationships are rooted in a fear of pain? Are all such attempts nothing more than hopeless efforts to control an uncontrollable reality instead of simply accepting it as it is? Maybe. But

before we accept such a far-reaching conclusion prematurely, we must take possible alternatives into consideration.

I only came up with one other fundamental motivation for explanation, namely trying to explain consciousness in linguistic terms merely for the joy of it. In this mentality the act of explanation is not pursued with the aim of control in mind but rather because the individual simply enjoys it, similar to an artist who enjoys painting as a play of color. The curiosity about causal relationships can be grounded in a curiosity about (one's) life itself. This can only be non-instrumental if it is rooted in an acceptance of the self as it is. If the self would not be accepted, the 'knowledge' gained would instantly be instrumentalized to change reality.

But why would one person simply accept reality as it is, while others do everything in their power to deny it? The answer can only be that the act of acceptance depends on the expectation or belief that one has about the nature of one's self. We have already seen that the expectation that one's self is bad or unlovable creates fear of pain in us. In contrast to that, the knowledge that one's self is essentially good and lovable naturally leads to an acceptance, curiosity and enjoyment of self. The decisive difference between the most basic motivations out of which we try to explain consciousness is thus a matter of stance or attitude towards oneself. It is a matter of trust versus fear, of avoidance versus devotion, or, as I like to put it, a matter of love versus lack thereof. In the trustful attitude, the loving intimacy with oneself enables one to be playful, flexible and open-minded about using concepts to describe and explain reality. As it is not a matter of control necessitating certainty, concepts become playfully interchangeable. What exact word we call it does not matter because we do not aim at establishing control based on fixed concepts anyway. In the same way a poet is flexible in his use of words to transmit a particular feeling he has in mind, in the mentality of love an explanation of consciousness becomes more poetic than serious. We could speak therefore of an attitude of sincere playfulness or a sincere unseriousness on the loving side instead of a stiff seriousness on the controlling side.

If the essential attitude towards one's self is the decisive difference between our motivations for explanation, why is it that some are so fearful of their self and some are not? I am not sure if a definite and finale answer can be given here but the (psychosocial) idea that it is our unconscious beliefs about ourselves learned through our socialization, which are causal for this (Fromm, 1941) seems most applicable to me. It makes sense that a person

who has experienced a lack of love from his parents (unconsciously) assumes that his parents are right and do not love him because he is indeed unlovable. He thereby develops the (again unconscious) conviction that his self is bad and unlovable, with all the consequent inclinations to avoid reality I have discussed above.

On the other side, a person who has experienced deep love from his attachment figures has no reason to doubt that they loved him for the simple reason that he is essentially good and lovable. For such a person the attempt to control and change reality as it is would seem utterly counter-intuitive, whereas a playful exploration of reality would seem a logic consequence of his socialization.

Up until now, we have questioned our motivations to understand consciousness until we reached the fundamental dichotomy of love and lack of love. The decisive factor to understand why we try to explore consciousness in the first place, and why debates about it are as heated as they are, is our (learned) attitude towards oneself, thus a deeply personal and emotional issue.

One could argue of course that it does not matter what kind of attitude we take. Why should a fearful attitude be better or worse than a loving one? Why would it be relevant which one we take? Due to the confined space of this essay, I will only give a short answer to this important objection. In short, attitude matters if we want to be alive because only a trustful, loving attitude is life-affirming whereas a mistrustful, unloving attitude is non-livable and finally suicidal. If one is really convinced that one's own nature and reality itself is essentially bad, then why live on, why not commit suicide and simply end this failed experiment of life? As Alan Watts (2011) explains in his book "Wisdom of Insecurity" much more eloquently than I am able to, faith is the first condition for living. To be able to live we must have faith, we must trust reality as well as ourselves. The alternative is an intolerable mistrust in every action, every thought, every emotion, every experience that we have, which leads us into total paralysis or destruction but one way or the other into death. So, the issue of our attitude towards oneself is not inconsequential, nor a matter of personal taste, but indeed in the utmost sense existential.

## 2.2 Implications

If we were to accept these findings about the motivation of causal explanations of consciousness and their roots, what are the implications for our debate about consciousness and self and for our handling of philosophical discussions in general?

First, we must note that serious, combative debate in philosophy always is a sign of the fearful attitude towards oneself and thereby worthless to entertain. In the same way, a focus on the ‘right’ theory and a strict, rigid use of concepts are useless for life and rather sign of incapacity than something that should be taken seriously. It does not really matter whether one takes the position of a materialist, idealist, or dual-aspect monist for example, as all of these concepts, if taken seriously, are rooted in a fearful and thus futile attitude. The only sensible, i.e. love-based, handling of concepts is a playful, explorative, artistic, and flexible one.

Secondly, we have seen that because of the decisive importance of their emotional motivations, philosophical attempts for explanation and understanding, and thus arguably philosophical dialogues in general, are necessarily emotional and personal. By that philosophy can no longer be seen as something purely rational. Rather, it is deeply rooted in intuition and feeling, as Bergson (1912) has already pointed out. This is not only because our actions (even if it is only our pursuit of wisdom) always have an emotional motivation, but also because our feeling might be more telling about the real virtue of a statement or the quality of a philosopher. Recognizing rigidity and psychological resistance in someone is a feat of our emotional sensitivity, not of our rational faculties. We can recognize feelings in others because we feel ourselves. Without the capacity for feeling a rational entity cannot understand its opposite’s emotions or motivations. Looked at it from this angle, empathy and ability to love are much more veritable indicators of a good philosopher than mere intelligence or articulateness. It also means that true philosophy is a matter of the development of such loving qualities in a process of increasing self-realization. Philosophy is a deeply personal process of character development, a journey to discover one’s own capacity for love and joyful intimacy with oneself and existence. It is a journey to become a truly “productive person”, as Erich Fromm (1947) would have called it.

This finding might be surprising for many who understand philosophy as being about the pursuit of true concepts. In fact, concepts are not very interesting for a philosopher but

only practical tools to converse about his grasp of truth, beauty or love behind the linguistic symbols. The capacity to experience and enjoy these prime manifestations of significance is what matters. In some sense, we could say that there is no philosophy, no fixed theory that matters, but only philosophers, i.e. individuals which have recognized their true, loving self or are moving towards that. Not the words make a philosopher, but his character. Consequently, a philosophical text such as this one must never be taken seriously. Philosophical texts are not meant to be convincing but can only be inspirational at best. The highest achievement of such a text would be to inspire the reader to embark on his own, personal journey towards truth and love.

### **3 Conclusion**

In conclusion, we have seen that the attempt to explain consciousness is an attempt to describe its causal relationships, usually in order to gain a notion of control fueled by an attitude of fear of one's self. The tight relation between consciousness and self has allowed us to draw this conclusion by which the debate about consciousness becomes much more personal and concrete as we now recognize these vehement debates in the light of human psychology. Additionally, we have seen that there is an alternative motivation for explanation rooted in a trustful attitude towards oneself, which is the only attitude to live by. These findings have severe consequences for philosophy and how it is handled and practiced. Philosophical debates are not a matter of rational argumentation but always involve an emotional basic motivation. As this emotional ground is more relevant and telling than the particular concepts used, emotional sensitivity and self-understanding become more central to philosophy than rational intelligence and articulateness. This shows that philosophy is very different from how it is often understood, not a serious matter of intellectual dispute, but an individual, cooperative journey towards the personal realization of one's capacity for love. Philosophy is not about true concepts or a precise theory but about the development of the philosopher's character. It is emotional and personal.

In our investigation we gained a meta-perspective on the whole debate of consciousness from which we become less serious about the particular words used but instead highly sensitive for their handling, for the emotional stance their use is rooted in. We see then a philosopher's concepts and theories not as something leading to objective knowledge but

rather as what they are, as a self-disclosure of the philosopher's individual attitude towards himself. With this perspective, philosophical debate has a chance to finally end being stiffly serious but become meaningful, enjoyable and inspirationally relevant for our very lives again. Philosophical debate would cease to exist. Instead, we would engage in philosophical dialogue, a personal, sincere, and mutual encounter, an open and curious exchange of ideas hopefully assisting us on our journey towards self-understanding and love.

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