

# CONSCIOUSNESS AND FREEDOM

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-- The Determinism and Freedom Philosophy Website --

*It is not hard to find the established doctrines of determinism and freedom in the English-speaking philosophical world pretty tiring. Part of the reason may be that they remain uncertain at best. More of us have this attitude to Compatibilism and Incompatibilism. We should have it too, it certainly seems to me, to such variants as Semi-Compatibilism -- determinism is consistent with responsibility but not with freedom. Prof. Meixner teaches at the University of Regensburg, and is the author of [The Two Sides of Being: A Reassessment of Psycho-Physical Dualism](#). He certainly has untiring things to say of determinism and freedom. One of them is that there is a more fundamental connection between consciousness and freedom than British and American philosophy has supposed. Another, yet more untiring, is that consciousness would be out of place in a truly deterministic world. Still more bracing, there is religion at the end of the story. Maybe it can be naturalized. Something else is certain. Here is some strong reflection that has the resoluteness of the history of German philosophy.*

## 1. Two Less Usual Questions Regarding Consciousness

What is the meaning of consciousness? Before offering some speculations regarding the (full) meaning of consciousness, I propose to tackle a somewhat less ambitious question: What is consciousness good for? More precisely: What is the advantage that a conscious creature can draw from being conscious? That advantage surely must be part of the meaning of consciousness.

It seems undeniable that there must be some good in being conscious to some creature. For if there were no good in being conscious to any creature, why, then, does consciousness exist? The assertion that nothing existing in nature exists in vain is presumably a bit of an exaggeration. But it certainly seems hard to believe that consciousness exists as the rather widespread phenomenon in nature that it is, and at the same time has no positive function for any creature.

## 2. The Evolutionary Advantage of Being Conscious

It seems to me, on the contrary, that consciousness has at least one very robust positive function for all conscious creatures: consciousness enables them – not always, but more often than not – to survive long enough to contribute their genetic information to the genetic constitution of the next generation of their species. There are no tooth- and talonless cats around hunting mice. Why? Because tooth- and talonless cats could not survive long enough to produce offspring. There are, likewise, no non-conscious cats prowling over the lawn. Why? Because non-conscious cats could not survive long enough to produce offspring.

Not every living creature needs consciousness for ensuring survival up to and including successful propagation. A tree does not need consciousness for that. But creatures that are constituted in such a way that they have the ability of wide-ranging self-locomotion and that cannot survive in nature without employing that ability cannot do without consciousness. They need consciousness for finding the food they feed on and for dodging the deadly dangers their environment is replete with. Being conscious is a necessary condition of their survival, and therefore consciousness has a positive function for them and is a boon for them.

This seems obvious and uncontroversial. But, in fact, it is a bit surprising. For would not a well-balanced intricate network of reactive dispositions, installed in the brain of these creatures and answering in a differentiated life-preserving manner to a huge number of incoming complexes of stimuli, serve the same purposes that consciousness is said to serve? Many philosophers these days are only too happy to answer “yes” to this question, adding that the findings of neurobiology more or less conclusively show that the possibility envisaged in the question is in fact the case.

### 3. Is Consciousness an Activity of the Brain?

If neurobiology is right, then, it seems, we are left with a trilemma: either consciousness does not exist, or exists and is just this: the activity, or part of the activity, of a well-balanced intricate network of reactive dispositions installed in the brain, answering in a differentiated life-preserving manner to a huge number of incoming complexes of stimuli, or consciousness exists but is of no service to the conscious organism. As is well-known, Daniel Dennett is happy to embrace either the first or the second horn of this trilemma,<sup>1</sup> whereas David Chalmers is often misunderstood – though not without his own doing – as being content with its third horn.<sup>2</sup>

Though Descartes may have been wrong about many things, perhaps even about his own existence as a *res cogitans*, he was dead right about one thing, which we can also gather from his writings: that there is nothing more rationally certain than the existence of consciousness. I cannot here defend this view if it be thought to stand in need of defending. I hope, therefore, that everyone will agree that denying the existence of consciousness is not a viable option. Consciousness exists, and not only in human beings: it is rather common throughout the animal kingdom. To believe otherwise, to restrict consciousness to human beings only, seems to me a rather uncharitable position.

Embracing the first horn of the trilemma – denying the existence of consciousness – is out of the question. And there is nothing attractive to theory in embracing the third horn: in accepting the existence of consciousness and holding at the same time that it is of no service to conscious organisms. I have already addressed this option and what can be held against it.

We, therefore, seem to be left with the second horn of the trilemma: the identification of consciousness with the activity of a network of reactive dispositions in the brain, in accordance with incoming stimuli, for the benefit of the organism.

But mind-body dualists will hold that consciousness – though associated, in a manner not yet well understood, with cerebral activity, with the exercise of the physical, electrochemical powers of a physical organ – is not identical with that activity or with anything physical. But how can this be more than a statement of blind belief? If neurobiology shows that a network of reactive dispositions, installed in the brain and answering in a differentiated manner to incoming stimuli, serves the very same purposes that consciousness is said to serve, must we not conclude that consciousness is simply the activity, or part of the activity, of that dispositional network – given that both the nonexistence and the epiphenomenality of consciousness are out of the question? The mere appeal to intuitions – however fervently upheld – seems insufficient for distinguishing non-epiphenomenally existing consciousness from brain activity.

But, for one thing, even if cerebral activity were the functional equivalent of consciousness, cerebral activity might not be able to exist without consciousness – consciousness being, nonetheless, different from it. This is a way of reconciling the non-epiphenomenal existence of consciousness with mind-body dualism on the one hand and the purported findings of neurobiology on the other. If nonphysical consciousness were, on nomological grounds, a necessary condition of the cerebral activity which is its functional equivalent, then it could hardly be said to be an epiphenomenon in the sense that is ontologically negative and a reason for philosophical dissatisfaction.

The crucial question, however, is whether a certain network of reactive dispositions in the brain that answers in a differentiated manner to incoming stimuli does indeed serve the very same purposes that consciousness serves. In order to answer this question negatively, we need not deny neurobiological findings, we merely need to deny a certain interpretation of these findings. The findings of neurobiology point in the direction of the following conclusion, though they are still far from having conclusively established it:

For every conscious event A there is a brain event B such that everything that causes A also causes B, and vice versa, and such that everything that is caused by A is also caused by B, and vice versa.

The relationship between conscious events (events in consciousness) and certain brain events that can be gathered from the preceding thesis is their causal equivalence. Thus the findings of neurobiology point towards the causal equivalence of conscious events and certain brain events, although, as I said, neurobiology is far from having established even that much.

A certain network of reactive dispositions in the brain that answers in a differentiated manner to incoming stimuli can therefore be said to be the causal equivalent of consciousness. But we are not forced to conclude from this fact (if it is a fact) that the dispositional network and consciousness serve exactly the same purposes, that they are functional equivalents. I am aware that many thinkers identify functional equivalence with causal equivalence, functional role with causal role; but this identification is a mistake, because sometimes there is a functional difference, in a clear sense, on top of a causal equivalence. And so it is in the case of conscious events and the brain events that are their causal equivalents.

Every conscious event intrinsically signifies something to someone; in the overwhelming majority of cases, conscious events usefully intrinsically signify something to the subject of consciousness concerned, and hence function to the advantage of that subject. In contrast, no brain event intrinsically signifies anything to anyone. Therefore: although conscious events and certain brain events are – presumably – causal equivalents, they are not functional equivalents.

In this perspective, it is quite clear that the trilemma adduced above is a false one. We can fully accept the findings of neurobiology and retain our belief in the existence of consciousness that is useful to conscious organisms, and nevertheless there is no need for us to identify consciousness with some existing activity of the brain. In order to see things this way, one merely needs to avoid interpreting scientific data in a metaphysically biased way. These data accord some justification to the assertion that consciousness and a certain type of brain activity are causally equivalent; they accord no justification to the assertion that they are functionally equivalent.

#### **4. Consciousness as Intrinsic Signification, and Indeterminism**

The next questions that must concern us here are the following two: (1) How can the invoked concept of intrinsic signification be elucidated? (2) What is the significance of the fact that conscious events have functional roles that are different from the functional roles of the brain events that are their causal equivalents?

Regarding question (1): An event is intrinsically significant if, and only if, by and in itself it provides immediate information – that is, information which neither involves causation nor translation – to exactly one of its own constituents. Thus a pain event, for example, is intrinsically significant, since by and in itself it provides immediate information to exactly one of its own constituents: to the subject of the pain. Indeed, as I said, every conscious event – whether without an intentional object (as a pain event) or with one (as an event of visual perception) – is an intrinsically significant event, and it also seems to be true that every intrinsically significant event is a conscious event.

There is a further question: What is the nature of the intrinsic addressee of the immediate information provided by an intrinsically significant event? One candidate for the holder of this role that comes to mind is the conscious organism with which the intrinsically significant event is associated. But the organism is not a constituent of an intrinsically significant event associated with it (though sometimes it is an intentional object of such an event), and therefore it cannot be the intrinsic addressee of the immediate information provided by that event. A headache that I have at some time – a

more than merely unpleasant sensation – is an intrinsically significant event that is associated with this conscious organism, with my living body; but my body is not a constituent of that event. The true intrinsic addressee of the immediate information that my headache provides by and in itself to exactly one of its own constituents is not my body or any part of it, not even my brain. I am myself that addressee.

My headache has a certain causal equivalent, an electrochemical event in my brain. But the latter event is not intrinsically significant. If it were, it would have to have an intrinsic addressee – one of its own constituents – to whom it provides immediate information; but it has no such constituent. Therefore, the electrochemical event in my brain, though a causal equivalent, is not a functional equivalent of my headache.

My headache is intrinsically significant to me; the corresponding electrochemical event in my brain, though a causal equivalent of the former event, is not intrinsically significant to me. What is the point of this extra function my headache has? This brings us to the second question formulated above: the question of the significance of the fact that conscious events have functional roles that are different from the functional roles of the brain events that are their causal equivalents. What is the point of their intrinsically signifying something to someone, while brain events do not intrinsically signify anything to anyone?

Regarding question (2): One possible answer to this question is to say that there simply is no point to the fact mentioned in it. But this is not a plausible answer. My headache, indeed, may have its extra function uselessly, but this is certainly not true of every pain event.

We get to the heart of the matter if we ask ourselves what would be the point of there being intrinsically significant events – conscious events – if determinism were true. By determinism I mean the doctrine that the laws of nature alone are sufficient to determine the entire history of the world if a complete initial segment of that history is given.<sup>3</sup>

Under determinism, information – immediate or not – cannot be action-relevant to anyone, for the simple reason that under determinism there cannot be any actions, where by an action I mean the exclusion by an agent at a certain time  $t$  of at least one nomologically possible continuation of the history of the world after time  $t$ . Clearly, if determinism were true, then no such excluding could be done at any time  $t$ , because, under determinism, at every time  $t$  there is just one nomologically possible continuation of the history of the world after time  $t$  (and that single nomologically possible continuation cannot be excluded because it cannot but be the actual continuation of the history of the world after time  $t$ ).

Thus, if determinism were true, there would be no point in there being intrinsically significant events, no point in there being events which provide immediate information to exactly one of their own constituents. The existence of such events would be utterly otiose – a fairly bad joke of nature. Why? Because intrinsically significant events, conscious events, are evidently geared to providing information that, usually, is maximally action-relevant to an agent – whereas under determinism there could be no actions and only agents that cannot act. Unless nature has done a very large thing – namely, the bringing forth of widespread consciousness – utterly in vain, determinism must be false.

The function of intrinsic signification that a conscious event has, and that the brain event which is its causal equivalent has not, is to give the agent, which is intrinsic to the conscious event, in the most immediate manner possible information on which to base its actions. That agent – for example, I – is in the service of a certain living organism (which, in its turn, is in the service of the agent); it is nothing other than the soul of that organism.

## **5. The Biological Soul Both as Subject of Consciousness and Agent**

The soul of the organism is the subject of consciousness which is implicit in the

conscious events that are associated with the organism, the entity to which the information provided by them is immediately and intrinsically addressed. Normally, the information provided by conscious events fits more or less tightly the task of the soul that is to use this information (i. e., that has evolved to use this information) in acting for the survival and the well-being of the organism of which it is the soul. However, the fit between conscious information and its (so to speak) evolution-intended use is much less tight in the case of modern human souls – because their ancestors have managed to secure, in the course of thousands of years, an environment that, normally, is rather depleted of dangers for human beings and, on the other hand, full of easily accessible resources for them. This historical matter of fact is responsible for the liberty (though not by itself for the capacity) that modern human souls have to pursue interests which can be broadly described as cultural. But certainly the generation of culture is, from the evolutionary perspective, only a secondary field of consciousness – as is the generation of pure (i. e., nonfunctional) joy, which plausibly can already be found at the subhuman level<sup>4</sup> – and a secondary task for the souls of organisms. The primary field of consciousness and the primary task for the souls of organisms is survival. infinite duration into the past if the history of the world is of infinite duration into the past.

## 6. Consciousness and Freedom

I have argued that consciousness would be out of place in a deterministic world, since the use of consciousness is to help secure the survival of a living organism by providing its soul, whose appearance in time is an outcome of the evolutionary process, in the right manner with information of the right kind – information on which the soul can base its actions. In a deterministic world there would be no actions, and while consciousness in a deterministic world would still have its function of intrinsic signification, its having that function whereas its cerebral causal equivalent is lacking it would be a fact that, contrary to appearance, is without any significance and therefore a fact that is utterly misleading from the metaphysical point of view. It is hard to believe that nature might play such a trick on us (let alone God).

An action is, qua action, a free action in the sense that the initial segment of the history of the world that is prior to it does not determine it (on the basis of the laws of nature); otherwise, the nomologically possible continuations of the history of the world that are excluded by it would already have been excluded by the initial segment of the history of the world that is prior to it. Therefore: although some conscious events solicit actions – for example, the pain that ensues upon touching a very hot object – no conscious event determines an action. Hence it is a mistake to assume that actions are (sufficiently) caused by conscious events. If one wants to say that actions are caused by something, then one must say that they are caused by the agent, by the soul of the organism. The information that a conscious event provides to that agent is, therefore, nondeterminative; it leaves the ultimate decision what to do with it up to the agent (but certainly the agent-soul is not always able to use the information provided to it beneficially).

That every action is free in the sense just described does not yet mean that its agent had a choice about it: that there was an alternative possible action open to the agent at the time. But unless there is some inscrutable determination at work on top of nomological determination, it follows that every action is such that its agent had a choice about it.

The installation of an agent, acting in favor of and through its organism on the basis of immediate nondeterminative information provided to it in conscious events of which it is the subject, the installation of a soul on top of all the batteries of automatic reaction mechanisms an organism possesses has proved to be a rather successful invention of evolution. One decisive factor of that success is of course that most things that are of vital importance to the organism are not effected by its agent-soul at all, but precisely by the organism's automatic mechanisms. The agent-soul is there for the less

common contingencies, and it is usually separated from most other things that vitally concern the organism by not being provided in consciousness with immediate information about them.

Within these limits, however, within the limits set by its state of information and its range of choices (the extent of which range is directly proportional to the richness of its state of information), the power of the agent-soul – especially of the human soul – can be very great, even to the extent of transcending the interests of its organism. This is strikingly illustrated by an old story which German pupils learning Latin in the 1960s and 1970s could still read in their textbooks, but which, presumably, is too awfully heroic for the taste of the present time. I am speaking about the story of Mucius Scaevola. Mucius Scaevola, when captured in the attempt to assassinate King Porsenna who was laying siege to Rome, held his right hand into the fire and allowed it to be consumed by it, thereby dissuading Porsenna from further laying siege to Rome, convincing him that it is full of hundreds of Mucius Scaevolae fearing neither death nor pain in defending their nation.

Imagine the pain, imagine the soul that withstood it. The story is probably a legend; but comparable things have really happened, as we all know.

## 7. The Insect-Objection

It is time to consider the serious objections that can be raised against the views on consciousness I advocate in this paper.

One objection is this: Insects are conscious animals. They, for example, experience colors. But at the same time they are automata that blindly follow the programs that are activated in them in reaction to outward or inward stimuli. Hence the proposed link between consciousness and freedom of action does not exist.

I respond that the objector is overly impressed by reports on insects that, if encountering some objectively insignificant anomaly in the process of achieving their preset goals, go through their preset rigid routines to achieve these goals an indefinite number of times (as often as one makes them encounter the very same anomaly). These reports are true, of course. But of course they do not show that the entire life of insects consists in rigid routines and reflexes.

If this were the case, if an insect never ever had a choice about anything in any situation of its life, then there would be no point in its being conscious. A set of non-consciously operating mechanisms triggered by non-consciously received stimuli would be quite enough to steer it for a while through the dangers to the resources of the part of the world that is its environment. But while nature is sometimes prodigal, it usually is not, and consciousness is too widespread a phenomenon, even in the kingdom of insects, to be a superfluous excrescence of evolution. This points us to the assumption that even an insect sometimes has a choice, a small choice undoubtedly, and a small soul that makes the choice, while being at the same time the subject of the insect's small consciousness.

There cannot be much deliberation going on when an insect makes a choice, certainly. But, in the first place, the presence of deliberation is not a necessary condition of making choices (since even we make choices – and rational ones – without deliberation, and such choices are far too often the right choices as that they could be the products of a mere chance generator); and in the second place, a rudimentary form of deliberation – consisting simply in the naked presentation of alternative possibilities – may well be present even when an insect (its soul) makes a choice. (Even insects seem to be capable of perplexity and bewilderment; if they are indeed capable of these states, rudimentary deliberation should also not be beyond them.)

What is indeed crucial for the making of choices is the presence of a unitary subject of both consciousness and agency which has at least a rudimentary consciousness of itself (and of its “realm” – the organism – within its environment: a sense of being in the world). But it is sufficient for rudimentary self-consciousness if

there are, for example, pain events associated with the organism: there cannot be a pain of any subject of consciousness (and every pain is a pain of some subject of consciousness) without being in its consciousness its pain.

Should biology discover that insects are in fact in every situation and in every respect deterministic automata, then we should reconsider the question whether they are indeed conscious; then we should seriously draw into consideration the conclusion that they are not conscious at all (even though they have sensory organs and nervous systems that are remote analogs of ours). Why, for example, should an insect feel pain – and hence have a subject of consciousness (which, properly speaking, feels the pain) – if there is never ever a situation in which the insect – or more properly speaking the insect's agent-soul, which is identical to its subject of consciousness – can effectively decide to do something or other about it? For avoiding that a particular damage to the body becomes worse than it is, the insect does not need to feel pain, if it is always the case – in any such situation of bodily damage – that there is at most one way of evasion open to it; it does not need, then, a subject of consciousness which will act as it thinks fit (perform an action in the above-defined sense) on the basis of pain-information and other immediate information provided to it. Likewise, if an insect were a deterministic automaton, why should an insect feel fear or desire or pleasure? There is no point at all, then, to its having these emotions – or to its being in any other conscious state.

If an animal is in every situation of its life an automaton that reacts in a deterministic manner to the given combination of inner and outer conditions, then there is no evolutionary advantage whatever in the installation of the consciousness-agency-apparatus, having at its center the agent-soul. It is, admittedly, not a logical impossibility that a deterministic automaton is conscious, and it may so have happened that some conscious living beings are deterministic automata. After all, evolution has sometimes produced rather freakish beings. But it is highly unlikely, in view of the considerations that I have offered, that a creature is a deterministic automaton if it is in fact conscious

## **8. The Physics-Teaches-Us-Objection**

Here is another objection to the views on consciousness I advocate in this paper. How could they be true? Doesn't physics teach us (1) that the physical conservation laws are true, and (2) that determinism is as good as true (to a very high degree of approximation) in the mesocosmos where conscious beings live, and (3) that every physical event has a physical event as its sufficient cause, if it has any sufficient cause at all?

I respond as follows: Since the agent-soul serves its organism by selecting, in the light of immediate informations provided to it in consciousness, from among nomologically possible continuations of the past history of the world (i. e., from continuations Y such that in the past + Y all the regularities which are the actual laws of nature are preserved), the physical conservation laws are not violated by the activities of the consciousness-agency-apparatus. This takes care of (1).

Concerning (3), which is a principle of physical causal closure and can well be called simpliciter "the Principle of Physical Causal Closure," I would like to point out that it is not something that physics teaches us or could teach us. Rather, it is one of the dogmas of physicalistic metaphysics. Curiously, it is advanced by physicalists as a strong argument in favor of their position. But the correctness of that position was not in question for the physicalists all along; what they are really doing in advancing the Principle of Physical Causal Closure is merely to assert a fairly obvious logical consequence of their own world view – a world view that is quite infeasible and non-negotiable for them.

The metaphysical nature of the Principle of Physical Causal Closure emerges rather strikingly when we consider that the majority of physicists presently believes that some physical events have no sufficient physical cause, the reason for this being

ultimately that they have not found any plausible sufficient physical causes for these events even after the most diligent search. Suppose now that it is really true that some physical events do not have any sufficient physical cause. Then – leaving agnosticism aside – we have a metaphysical choice:

- (a) We can assume that all of these physical events that have no sufficient physical cause have no sufficient cause at all, or
- (b) we can assume that all of these physical events that have no sufficient physical cause have – each of them – a nonphysical sufficient cause (where I leave it open whether “nonphysical” means as much as “entirely nonphysical” or as much as “not entirely physical”), or
- (c) we can assume that some of these physical events that have no sufficient physical cause have a nonphysical sufficient cause, and that some of them have no sufficient cause at all.

There is no – I repeat no – evidence from physics for either (a) or (b) or (c); physics, as the science of physical entities, is entirely neutral between them. The question whether we should adopt (a), or (b), or (c) is a purely metaphysical question, a question strictly “following upon” physics, and no less so if the question is considered and answered by physicists. If we adopt (a), then we can stick to the Principle of Physical Causal Closure, but must deny the Principle of Sufficient Cause, which says that every event has a sufficient cause. If we adopt (b), then we can stick to the Principle of Sufficient Cause, but must deny the Principle of Physical Causal Closure. If we adopt (c), then we must deny both the Principle of Physical Causal Closure and the Principle of Sufficient Cause. Leaving agnosticism aside, what, in reason, should we do?

Choosing (c), and therefore the denial of both the Principle of Physical Causal Closure and the Principle of Sufficient Cause, is certainly the rationally least attractive metaphysical option. But there is nothing that makes the choice of (a) rationally preferable to the choice of (b); for the Principle of Sufficient Cause, which can be retained if (b) is chosen, is at least as metaphysically attractive as the Principle of Physical Causal Closure, which can be retained if (a) is chosen.

So why should mind-body dualists be impressed if physicalists advance the Principle of Physical Causal Closure against them, claiming for it the authority of physics? It does not in fact fall under that authority, and, from the metaphysical point of view, we are certainly not unreasonable if we consider it false.

I have now taken care of (1) and (3) of the above three objections against the views on consciousness I advocate, which objections, taken together, one might term the “but-physics-teaches-us-objection.” There yet remains objection no. (2).

Though physicalists are unwilling to deny what the majority of modern physicists believe in: that indeterminism is prevalent in the microworld, physicalists – for understandable reasons – nevertheless maintain that in the mesocosmos determinism rules. They do admit that its rule in the mesocosmos is not guaranteed to be absolute and exceptionless, as was believed in the 19th century; but for all practical purposes, physicalists maintain, the rule of determinism in the mesocosmos can be assumed to be absolute and exceptionless.

But this is an assumption of physicalism, it is not something that physics teaches us. If it seems to me that I just now freely lifted my right hand, upon deciding to do so, then physics does certainly not teach that this event is, except for a tiny margin of contrary probability, necessitated on the basis of the laws of nature by the complete initial segment of the history of the world that is previous to it. How could physics teach any such thing?

Nor does physics teach another consequence of mesocosmic determinism, namely, that at any point in time before life evolved on this planet the entire history of the human species, which is replete with terrible crimes, was already a more or less inescapable consequence. All compatibilist attempts to reconcile freedom and



determinism seem to me just so many attempts to obfuscate the horrible absurdity of such a view of human history.

But physics is entirely innocent of such ideas. The reason for this is simple: it is not a claim of the science of physics that the laws of nature discovered by it are in principle sufficient for explaining everything that happens in the world on the basis of initial conditions. The completeness of physics (in the sense exhibited in the preceding sentence) is not a claim of physics, but a claim of physicalistic metaphysics about physics. As such, the completeness of physics is a matter of nonscientific, philosophical belief.

Since physics leaves me a choice, I, as metaphysician, rather choose to believe something else; namely, that also in the mesocosmos determinism is false and not even approximately true. Believing this is all the easier for me in view of the fact that such belief opens up the possibility of giving a satisfactory account of the positive function of consciousness, of what consciousness – consciousness that is not reduced to something it is not – is good for in an evolutionary perspective. In a nutshell: consciousness is advantageous from an evolutionary point of view, in the manner I have described; but it can be so only if determinism in the mesocosmos is not even approximately true.

## **9. The Transcendental Objection to Physicalism**

One may well wonder what makes the metaphysical positions of determinism and physical causal closure so attractive to so many. The explanation I am going to suggest for this phenomenon of the history of ideas will bring me to the issue of the meaning of consciousness, regarding which I promised to offer some speculations at the beginning of this paper.

Physics is a theoretical system that arises out of human consciousness as an attempt – a rather successful one – to make systematic sense of our experiences of the physical world. As such, physics is an interpretation of a region of intentional consciousness, a region shared by the consciousnesses of many. But it so happens in the minds of not a few people that they lose sight of the soil out of which the tree of physics has grown; perhaps they are blinded by its spectacular growth and by the many good, or at least impressive, fruits that it has, in growing, brought forth. For these people, the total intentional object of the region of intentional consciousness that physics is concerned with, the physical world, turns into something that is metaphysically absolute – shown, they believe, to be such by physics itself. The physical world is thought by them to be everything, and in consequence physics becomes contaminated in their minds by a massive incursion of metaphysics. Determinism and the Principle of Physical Causal Closure (or some stronger principle than this) are assumed without much hesitation, since they are thought to arise out of physics itself and to be required for its very well-being – principles which, if believed in, make it impossible to understand what physics really is, and also what consciousness really is, as is amply illustrated by the modern philosophy of mind.

The epistemological pathology just described – which lies at the heart of physicalistic naturalism – was pointed out, in effect, as early as Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and as late as Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, and by many other authors, who were inspired by the tradition of German Transcendental Philosophy. Analytic Philosophers whose native tongue is English have largely ignored this tradition, one of the many reasons for this being that they dislike the epistemological idealism that is more or less explicitly advocated by all Transcendental Philosophers. But one does not have to become an epistemological idealist in order to accept the epistemological criticism of physicalistic naturalism that is implicit in Transcendental Philosophy.

Deplorably, the rich notion of consciousness that goes with Transcendental Philosophy (including Transcendental Phenomenology) and the earlier idealistic

philosophy – Berkeley’s and Hume’s idealism foremost – is all but forgotten in the Analytic Philosophy of mind that is prevalent today in the English-speaking world. It is a much needed corrective for this type of philosophy to take cognizance of the fact that there is a notion of consciousness in the history of philosophy according to which some philosophers – e. g., Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Husserl – have believed that consciousness contains (as a construction remaining entirely within its bounds) the entire (knowable) world.<sup>5</sup> To this rich notion of consciousness<sup>6</sup> I, too, would like to pledge my allegiance – though I am not an idealist. I am, of course, not supposing that the same richness of consciousness can be found at every level of evolutionary development. But I would indeed maintain that certain aspects of consciousness extend all the way down in the ladder of conscious life: the presence (in conscious events) of a subject of consciousness, the presence of phenomenal qualia, the presence of intentionality and hence of intentional objects (though presumably very crude ones in the lower forms of conscious life).<sup>7</sup>

## 10. The Meaning of Consciousness

If we reject the idealistic idea that, in a sense, consciousness is everything, what, then, is the meaning of consciousness? Martin Buber beautifully expressed the distance which any attempt to answer this question must straddle: ‘The conscious mind [in German: *der Geist*] appears in time as a product, even as a by-product of nature, but nonetheless it is precisely the conscious mind that timelessly envelops her.’ (Buber 1983, 32; my translation.) In this paper, I have offered a sketch of that part of the meaning of consciousness that is given by the fact that consciousness arises as a product of nature<sup>8</sup> (and consciousness can only seem to be a mere by-product of nature). But this natural (biological) meaning is only a part of the entire meaning of consciousness. The other part is given by the astonishing fact that this product of nature, which comes into being at some point in time, seemingly by accident, and maintains itself in existence because it is advantageous in the struggle for survival, nevertheless reveals to us human beings the timeless constitution of nature in her totality. How can this be? We have the two parts of the meaning of consciousness in our hands; what we do not know yet is how they fit together. If we knew how they fit together, then we would fully comprehend what the meaning of consciousness is.

I do not think that physicalistic naturalism can find a satisfactory answer to the question of how the survival-function and the theoria-function of consciousness (as I call it) fit together. The theoria-function of consciousness, and the universal moral consciousness that accompanies that function and cannot be found without it, certainly cannot be explained as an optimization, brought about by environmental pressure, of the survival-function of consciousness. Humanity would be the ruler of this earth even if it had never left the level of conscious intelligence that *homo habilis* had. It was, of course, cultural evolution that initiated the theoria-function of consciousness and brought it to its present height. But what initiated cultural evolution?

Nothing less than a divine spark of enlightenment, I submit. At a certain point in time, humans – they were already survivors and in this sense *capax naturae* – became by divine grace *capax Dei*. They became able (in principle) to know God to the extent He chooses to reveal Himself, and able (in principle) to be like Him to the point of being images of Him as creator. But since the totality of nature – all creation – is the larger part of God’s self-revelation and the prototype of His doings, humans became at the same time also able (in principle) to know nature in her totality and to transform her morally responsibly in the light of that knowledge. They, who were already *capax naturae*, became not only *capax Dei* but also *capax naturae secundum imaginem Dei*.

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## NOTES

1 See Dennett 1991.

2 See Chalmers 1996. Chalmers merely upholds the logical epiphenomenality of consciousness, not the nomological epiphenomenality. But he sometimes speaks as if logical epiphenomenality were

epiphenomenality simpliciter

3 This initial segment will have a first moment if the history of the world has a first moment, or be of infinite duration into the past if the history of the world is of indefinite duration into the past.

4 I am grateful to Alvin Plantinga for having drawn my attention to this.

5 Concerning Husserl's criticism of naturalism and his comprehensive notion of consciousness, see

Meixner 2003.

6 If it had not become common these days to associate with the term "phenomenal consciousness" the

impoverished sense of purely qualitative consciousness, it would not be amiss to call the notion of

consciousness I adhere to "phenomenal consciousness." In order to understand this term in the sense in which I would agree to use it for my conception of consciousness, one must understand it in the way Husserl – the originator of Phenomenology – would have understood it, i. e., such that phenomenality

does not preclude either abstractness or structure.

7 I am grateful to Josef Quitterer for his comments on this paper, which made clear to me the need to say more about my concept of consciousness.

8 More on this subject can be found in Meixner 2004.