

INTRODUCTION

Naturalism takes science to be our best guide to what exists. Naturalistic theories of mind have however always had difficulties making room for consciousness. Consciousness seems to us to be something that is essentially *subjective*. As such it strikes us as something that must of necessity resist the kind of objective descriptions of the mind we get from science. Those features of the mind which make consciousness subjective seem to point to a *limit* in our scientific conception of the mind. They seem to indicate the existence of something which cannot be accounted for by science. It is undeniable that there is something subjective about our conscious mental life. Yet subjectivity looks to be something which by its very nature must elude description in scientific terms. Must we conclude then that science cannot be our only guide to what exists, and hence that naturalism is false?

The idea that consciousness has a nature which resists scientific explanation is almost a working assumption of Edmund Husserl, the founder of a school of philosophy known as Phenomenology. Husserl's Phenomenology sought to describe all of the ways in which consciousness literally constitutes the world as it is perceived by us. To the extent that consciousness plays a role in generating the world we experience, Husserl thought that consciousness must be something that science can never explain. Later phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty were to add to Husserl's critique of naturalism. They were to concur with Husserl's thought that consciousness plays a role in shaping the reality we inhabit, so that there is something about this reality which can never be given an objective description.

Part of the aim of my thesis is to argue that there is something importantly right about this critique of naturalism. I agree with Husserl and the later phenomenologists that the world we perceive is shaped and given form through our ways of perceiving and interacting with it. However I argue that it is recognising this point which holds the key to defeating the argument against naturalism which I sketched above. I take up the idea that consciousness (and indeed our existence as persons more generally)

play a role in shaping the reality we experience. I use this idea to develop a naturalistic account of the conscious mind.

The approach I shall take to thinking about consciousness in what follows I will call “naturalised phenomenology”. Other philosophers have claimed to be doing naturalised phenomenology (see for instance Petitot *et al* 1999). What relation, if any, does my project bear to these philosophers?

Francisco Varela (1996) proposed a method for studying consciousness he dubbed “neurophenomenology”. Neurophenomenology makes use of first-person data gathered from subjects engaging in careful reflection on their experiences to study brain processes. Varela proposed the following working hypothesis:

‘Phenomenological accounts of the structure of experience and their counterparts in cognitive science relate to each other through reciprocal constraints.’ Varela (1996: 351)

The idea I take it is that the descriptions of conscious experience supplied by phenomenology are to act as a constraint on the account of consciousness we get from science. They are the explanandum if you like which it is the task of science to explain. However science equally counts as a constraint on what phenomenologists say about consciousness. This is to say that science could reveal some description of conscious experience arrived at through phenomenological reflection to be mistaken.

The idea that phenomenology might contribute to a science of consciousness is one we also find in Flanagan (1992). Flanagan suggests that the appropriate method for studying consciousness, which he dubs “the natural method”, is to listen carefully to what phenomenology, psychology and neuroscience have to say about consciousness and then to see ‘whether and to what extent the three stories can be rendered coherent, meshed and brought into reflective equilibrium.’

Both describe exactly the approach I shall be following in my thesis. However neither Varela nor Flanagan are particularly clear on why they think phenomenology can help when it comes to settling on a scientific theory about consciousness. A

working assumption in my project will be that when we sense an object, say a flower, and this object seems to us to be a certain way – the flower looks to be pink and seems to have a subtle scent to it – the appearance the flower presents to me is real. Appearances are subjective. An object cannot appear to be a certain way unless there is someone, a subject, to whom the object appears. Appearances are also real. This immediately generates a puzzle as to how something can be both subjective and real.

One response to this puzzle is to try to explain it away. Daniel Dennett (1991) for instance seems to be of the view that a flower appearing to me to be pink is just a matter of my reactive dispositions, in particular what I would be prepared to think and say about the flower and the way it seems to me. Dennett collapses the distinction between the way the flower seems to me and the way I think it seems to me. To collapse the distinction between a thing seeming to be *x* and my thinking that it is *x* is surely a mistake. Merleau-Ponty captures the point well:

‘Ordinary experience draws a perfectly clear distinction between sense-experience and judgement. It sees judgement as the taking of a stand, as an effort to know something valid for me at every moment of my life, and for other minds, actual and possible; sense experience, on the contrary, is taking appearance at its face value.’
(Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 34)

We may not be convinced by Merleau-Ponty description of what is involved in making a judgement, but the distinction he draws between sense-experience and judgement is surely right. Judgement requires one to *actively* take a stand on a question. Perception doesn't, we simply take things as we find them.

Where Dennett takes what people say and think about their conscious experiences as his datum, I shall take as my datum to be explained, how things ordinarily appear to us. The problem consciousness presents to the naturalist is to account for why things ordinarily appear to us as they do or indeed why they should appear any way whatsoever. It is these questions that I will use phenomenology to address in what follows.

My thesis has three parts. The first three chapters are concerned with explaining the relation between naturalism and phenomenology. In chapter 1 I set out what I understand to be the commitments of naturalism. I go on to present Husserl's critique of naturalism. I argue that Husserl's argument is unsuccessful. It rests on an idealist construal of phenomenology. I sketch an alternative way of thinking about his phenomenological project which is neutral on the question of idealism.

Chapter 2 presents Heidegger's argument against naturalism. Heidegger's argument presents more of a problem for my proposal to use phenomenology to develop a naturalistic account of consciousness. Heidegger gives us an argument against naturalism which doesn't rely on idealism. He argues that there is something phenomenology can describe – our ordinary lived experience – which will always be missing from a naturalistic account of the mind. In chapter 3 I connect this point with arguments that have been given which purport to establish the existence of an explanatory gap with respect to consciousness. I argue that the explanatory gap is located exactly where the phenomenologists attack naturalism. Phenomenology identifies just what it is that naturalistic theories leave out from their account of the mind.

The phenomenologists think that the hole they have identified right in the centre of the naturalist's account of the mind is one that cannot be filled. The remainder of my thesis take up this challenge on the naturalist's behalf. In chapters four and five I set out in detail a phenomenological account of conscious experience. Chapter 4 describes the account of perceptual intentionality we find in phenomenology. It is argued that the aboutness which attaches to our perceptual experiences cannot be understood as a causal or historical relation between perceiver and world. Instead there is a distinctively phenomenological species of intentionality which belongs to our experience purely in virtue of the ways in which they present the world as seeming to a subject.

Chapter 5 looks to phenomenology for an account of what it is to be a conscious creature. I present an account of consciousness according to which a conscious

creature is always self-conscious. The self-consciousness doesn't require the creature to be constantly engaged in thinking about itself. Rather it is a pre-reflective form of self-consciousness. I contrast this account of creature consciousness with the account we find in higher-order theories.

The second part of my thesis pins down more precisely exactly what it is that the naturalist is supposed to be incapable of explaining. The third and final part of my thesis returns to the opposition between naturalism and phenomenology. In chapter 6 I offer a response to the argument that has been given against naturalism thus far. I show how, contrary to the arguments of the first half of the thesis, the naturalist could in principle account for the conception of experience we find in phenomenology. The anti-naturalist argument the phenomenologist has given rests on a false conception of naturalism. In chapter 7 I take up the account of conscious experience that has been presented in chapters four and five and use this account to sketch in broad brushstrokes a naturalistic account of consciousness. Chapter 7 will show that phenomenology is something that can be naturalised and that the process is already well underway.