Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities
Volume 47 Part-II, June 2008

CONSCIOUSNESS: AN EXPLANATORY ENIGMA
A LAW IS A TRANSCENDENT OBJECT OF KNOWLEDGE
THERE CAN BE CONSCIOUSNESS OF A LAW, NOT A LAW OF CONSCIOUSNESS
SARTRE, "BEING AND NOTHINGNESS."

ZAHOOR H. BABER

ABSTRACT

It is a widely held belief that ***human consciousness*** is somehow a unique phenomenon within an otherwise physically determined universe. On the other hand, scientific view of the emergence of consciousness out of complex neuro-physiological brain processes is a widely accepted hypothesis amongst the evolutionary biologists. The scientific hypothesis is usually considered as an alternative to the ***enigmatic character*** of consciousness. Over the last decade, many scientists have propounded that consciousness is of material origin by offering experimental evidences from damaged brain cases. Nevertheless, the peculiarity of human consciousness does not give the scientist conclusive grounds for his cherished hypothesis. The most fundamental peculiarity of consciousness is human subjectivity and freedom that transcends all physical explanations. The physicalist approach in this context is oriented towards explaining away this subjectivity and freedom by deploying ***reductive models*** of explanations. The physical scientist believes that ***nothing can be uncaused*** or unaccounted for within the ***causal nexus*** of physical nature. Therefore, he believes that human consciousness cannot be a unique phenomenon.

Still, the ***deterministic model*** of human brain, based on complex causal mechanisms, cannot replace the subjective experience of freedom of consciousness. The reasons for this ***explanatory impossibility*** lie in the other associated aspects of consciousness overlooked by the physical scientist. One of the neglected aspect of this explanatory problem is the relation of this freedom with the notions of ***self*** **and** ***person***, which are essentially subjective aspects of human individual. It is clear at the outset that ***subjectivity*** of self defies all mechanical models of explanations. Even freedom of consciousness has no meaning without an ***individual human existence as a person*** along with its subjectivity. Thus, the abstract notion of free ***consciousness*** also requires grounding in a concrete form of human existence as a ***self-conscious*** human being in order to be understood properly.

The problem of understanding human consciousness troubles the scientists and philosophers alike. Every attempt to capture the nature of consciousness within some framework of explanation fails, as consciousness transcends the framework. In other words there always seems to be something more to consciousness than what can be said about it. However, from this it does not follow that we can arrive at a final explanation by *knowing more* about consciousness. Rather, the problem of explanation of consciousness

needs to be seen in, what I may dare say, *a non-explanatory sense;* which means that we are bound to see this as a *problem of explanation*, rather than a problem that can be solved by some kind of explanation. We need to raise here some different sort of questions like, for instance, *why* consciousness cannot be explained, rather than asking *how* it can be explained. It is clear at the outset that this problem cannot be solved through our pre-adopted methods of explaining the world and its objects. For, clearly, consciousness is not an object, and the added difficulty is that it is a *unique phenomenon* in that it cannot be subsumed under any general laws that may harbor multiple instances of the same or similar phenomenal entities.

Thus, the central purpose of this paper is to bring to the surface the *explanatory impossibility* about human consciousness, and to discuss the reasons for this. Moreover, it is important to point out and stretch certain experiential content of consciousness that seems to directly contradict our usual scientific or philosophical paradigms of explanations. From this pointing out, it may become possible for us to see this problem of explanation as a starting point of revising our scheme of understanding human beings.

The Self and its Mental States

To begin with any possible explanation of *mental states*, it is clear that existence of any mental state presupposes the existence of a *self* having those states. Though we may talk about mental states as such and put them into general categories like fear, anger, joy, and so on, but this seems only a linguistic convenience devoid of any *existential import.* Whenever it comes to the question of location of mental states, we are inevitably drawn back to the *person* having any of those so-called states. Thus it is obviously impossible to distinguish any mental state from the person and study it as an instance of a general law-like regularity of physical nature. The nature of person or self always eludes the generality due to the *subjectivity* of mental states. However it may, the scientific objectivity will always find this unreachable because of the *inwardness* of the mental. It seems that even our talk about *self* or *person* in a universal or general sense cannot account for the individual difference between persons or selves. The *existence* of a self or a person in the world with his subjectivity and inwardness seems to stand apart from all generalities or law-like formulations. Obviously, it is not only *consciousness* but *self-consciousness* which is the explanatory problem here. The problem is that, on the one hand, we cannot deny the existence of consciousness without contradicting ourselves, for denying presupposes its existence, and on the other, we cannot explain its existence because any explanation presupposes a law-like generality for subsuming the individual instance under it. This, clearly, cannot be done in case of consciousness because just like the case of mental states, it presupposes the existence of a person or self *who is conscious of himself and his surroundings.*

And here, we may as well acknowledge the differences between individual selves on the basis of their self-consciousness. Thus Churchland contends that,

> Upon first reflection, self-consciousness is likely to seem implacably mysterious and utterly unique. This is part of what makes it so

> fascinating. Upon deeper reflection, however, the veil of mystery begins to part just a little, and self-consciousness can be seen as one instance of a more general phenomenon.
> To be self-conscious is to have, at a minimum, *knowledge* of oneself. But this is not all. Self-consciousness involves knowledge not just of one's physical states, but knowledge of one's *mental states* specifically. Additionally, self-consciousness involves the same kind of *continuously updated* knowledge that one enjoys in one's continuous perception of the external world. Self-consciousness, it seems, is a kind of continuous apprehension of an inner reality, the reality of one's mental states and activities....[Moreover] Self-consciousness may vary from person to person, depending on which areas of discrimination and conception have been most thoroughly mastered. A novelist or psychologist may have running awareness of her emotional states that is far more penetrating than the rest of us enjoy; a logician may have more detailed consciousness of the continuing evolution of his beliefs; a decision-theorist may have a superior awareness of the flux of her desires, intentions, practical reasoning; a painter may have a keener recognition of the structure of his visual sensations; and so forth.[1]

It would be far from the actual if we accept the above explanation. Identifying self-consciousness with *inner* perception of one's mental states and activities makes consciousness *a spectator* of something else inside. This is absurd as there cannot be something going on inside apart from the self who is conscious of itself in the form of various mental states. The self cannot be divided into an observer and an agent at subjective level. The empiricist's typical tendency to explain things from an *observational point of view* confuses him when he talks about consciousness. Moreover, we cannot even talk about novelists or painters and forget that it is always an individual self-conscious person who is either this or that. The social category is secondary to the person and his self-consciousness. For, the person may *choose* to quit being a novelist at any time without loosing his powers of discriminations of his own mental states. Thus, the imposition of any categories presupposes one's conscious acceptance or rejection at any time. And it would be strange to expect that a person would always behave in a way he is expected to behave under the assigned identity without his own willingness or choice. Thus Churchland's observations are nothing but an *empirical bias* against the unexplainable unity of the *subjectivity* of self and its consciousness,

It is a further conundrum for empirical sciences that consciousness has the peculiar power to transcend any explanatory framework by its own reflexivity.[2] It is precisely this aspect of consciousness that is the source of *explanatory enigma* for physical sciences. And the same reflexivity is the source of that *freedom* which remains another grave explanatory problem. However, the scope of this paper does not allow me to discuss this in detail. So I will confine myself the question of consciousness as a more fundamental explanatory problem.

---

[1]. Churchland, P.M. Matter and Consciousness, Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 1993 p. 73.
[2]. Hampshire, Stuart Thought and Action, London: Chatto and Windus, 1965. p.14.

Sense-consciousness

Some philosophers have tried to explain this by arguing that self-consciousness pre-supposes what they call "sense-consciousness". Thus Anthony Kenny states,

> There are at least two sharply distinct things which may be meant by the term [self-consciousness]. The first is the consciousness which is the exercise of our capacity for perception; the awareness of, and ability to respond to changes in the environment which is given to us by the senses like hearing, seeing, smelling and tasting. The second is self-consciousness; the knowledge of what one is doing and why. In human beings self-consciousness pre-supposes sense-consciousness but is not identical with it.[3]

However, this definition seems silent about the abstract mathematical reasoning done consciously. It is difficult to see in what sense self-consciousness presupposes sense-consciousness in case of thinking about numbers, adding, multiplying and subtracting them. Again, Kenny argues later on that, "A dog may think that his master is at the door, but …it is hard to see how he can think that he is thinking that his master is at the door"[4]. Now given this it follows that animals cannot do so because they cannot formulate their sense-consciousness into propositional forms using linguistic symbols. This means that Kenny is willing to grant self-consciousness to them if they could do so. Thus under this assumption self-consciousness is another name for linguistic skills exercised by creatures. But the difficulty is that if animals and humans are distinguishable *merely* by their ability to use language, the question of self-conscious becomes superficially associated with linguistic powers. This does not throw light on the inner nature of self-consciousness. Thus animals may be self-conscious but they cannot talk to others or themselves, while we can do so. Moreover, how can Kenny be sure that the dog cannot think that he is thinking? There seems to be no criteria for this and any appeal to *Behaviorism* would lead us back to those absurdities for which the behaviorists are already famous.

Possibility of a Description

Now, it is clear so far, that in our self-consciousness we are aware of our 'self' in a way that we can discriminate our various mental states. It is also clear, so far, that self-consciousness itself cannot be reflected upon as a kind of mental state. Rather our ability to identify and discriminate any of our mental states pre-supposes our being self-conscious. In that sense it is given *a priori* as a condition of our awareness of our mental states.

Here one may, so to speak, embark upon the project of describing the self as thoroughly as possible, with the expectation that this would somehow lead ultimately to a complete descriptive knowledge of self such that self-consciousness would no more remain

---

[3]. Kenny, Anthony, Will, Freedom, and Power, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975. p. 5.
[4]. Ibid. P. 5

mysterious to us. However, so far, all philosophical approaches have ended up, one way or the other, into skepticism.
Thus Hume's well known thorough skepticism led him to declare that self is nothing but a bundle of perceptions without any discoverable underlying substantial unity.[5]

Subjectivity

Hume's failure to find a self besides sense impressions involves the same difficulty that science faces in the accounting for the subjectivity of individual human person. The search fails in finding any objectively verifiable entity which could be characterized as the inner consciousness of oneself. Perhaps the scientific approach is itself contradictory in that it is searching for explanation of subjectivity in objective terms. Keeping this in mind, some philosophers have insisted that, "...in very strict sense of the terms there can be no science of man".[6] The difficulty is that subjectivity cannot be denied without self-contradiction, neither can it be explained through empirical methods for that again end up in pointing out at something other than the mental state itself. Evans contends likewise that,

> One of the features traditionally claimed to be most characteristic of the self is its essential subjecthood. On this view, the self lies behind its experiences and apart from them, and no attempt to capture the self in experience can succeed because if it did it would make the self an object and it cannot he an object without ceasing to be a self. On this conception the self is forever hidden from view. Hence it was in vain that Hume looked into himself for some impression of himself, for had he by chance come across anything with the required specifications he would have come across an object and not a subject. [7]

However, this logical difficulty or impossibility does not stop the physical scientist to try to explain consciousness as an outcome of brain processes. Now let us see where this kind of explanation leads.

Brain and Consciousness

Having shown that subjectivity of self and self-consciousness is an apparent obstacle in way of its scientific explanation, we cannot push aside the explanatory attempts through their causal connections with the brain processes. Thus, one may rely on neuro-science for establishing, in an empirically verifiable way, the exact correlation of our inner mental states with various brain processes going on inside the skull. But this expectation encounters the difficulty that the object of explanation ever eludes empirical attempts. As Velmans points out,

---

[5]. Hume, David. A Treatise of Human nature, ed by L.A. Selby Bigge, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960 pp. 251-260.
[6]. Chislom, M. Roderick. "Human Freedom and the Self", in *Free Will*, edn. Gary Watson, New York, Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 24-35.
[7]. Evans, .C. O. *The Subject of Consciousness*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1970, p. 146

> While the neural *causes* and (correlates) of pains and other tactile sensations experienced are in the brain, these need to be distinguished from their effects (the experiences themselves). At the same time, it is a brute fact about consciousness that examination of the brain from the outside can *only* reveal its physical causes and correlates. It can *never* reveal the experiences themselves. One would never guess, from inspection of the brain alone, that its 'owner' has an inner conscious life, within an experienced body embedded in surrounding phenomenal world. But from the subjects perspective the existence of this rich phenomenology is undeniable and much of its appearance can be readily described. Given that very few of this rich phenomenology resembles brain states, it is difficult to imagine what science *could* discover to demonstrate that such phenomenal worlds are ontologically identical to states of the brain. [8]

This view of the state of things, as experienced, and as that which can be pointed out externally by others, shows how difficult it is to even think about a possible correlation of conscious experience with brain states. As it turns out, it is not clear what is asserted when a correlation is claimed. Perhaps it is like asserting that the conscious state depends, for its existence, on the brain states and if, by accident, the brain is damaged, so goes the so-called conscious experience as well. Now of course it is in fact the case that the brain damage destroys the conscious experiences actually or possibly constituting a person's life. But still, it is not clear what is meant by saying that the conscious experience is the outcome of the brain states. What Velmans is arguing about is that brain states *qua brain states* are merely physiological processes, repeatable in their basic activity, while the conscious experiences arguably associated with them are quite different, full of "rich phenomenology". And it is not even imaginable how those physiological processes involving neuro-chemical changes might bring out the whole conscious episode so characteristic of a person's life. So the problem of correlation, seen in this way, becomes a conundrum in so far as the way in which we experience our life and the way the brain functions physiologically are qualitatively distinct aspects of our life.

The identity of mental states

Now even the scientific identification of inner mental states as *states of the brain* involves the possibility, upon close examination, of identifying the mental states irrespective of the way one experiences them. If I am, say, in a mental state of anger and hate somebody, this would be from my *particular* point of view, behind which my personal relations and meanings are working. But in so far as it is identified generally as a mental state of anger, the exact correlate of which is a physical state of *the brain*, identifiable quantitatively, the later must be individuated as a physical state from the rest of the states of the world, and numerically constituting the world.

---

[8]. Velmans, Max. *Understanding Consciousness*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 130

The problem with this lies in the difficulty that as experienced it is correlated not with certain contemporary brain states but with rest of my psychological person. That is how we identify our mental states as anger, happiness, and timidity and so on. In this respect it is just a linguistic convenience to call them states which is misleading. From the point of view of the person he is angry; he does not have anger as a mental state to which he can point out in some way. But from the external point of view he is in a particular mental state called anger.

These two points of views differ essentially in that the former involves one's being in anger as a whole person, while the later unavoidably refers to this *as if* the brain suddenly changed into a state of particular composition of electrical impulses generating intense electro-chemical outbursts which were experienced consciously with its typical behavioral patterns.

As conscious experience, any mental state immediately arises engaging us wholly or partially as whole persons, and continues or vanishes depending upon whether we continue or discontinue attending to them by way of deciding or choosing. There seems to be no way of distinguishing them as certain qualities in addition to what we experience. This problem was most clearly pointed out by Sartre in his phenomenological analysis which clearly brings out the nature of the difficulty involved.

> If the intention is not a thing in consciousness, then the being of intention can only be consciousness. It is not necessary to understand by this that on the one hand, some external cause (an organic trouble, an unconscious impulse, another Erlebnis) could determine that psychic state--a pleasure, for example,--produces itself, and that on the other hand, this event so determined in its material structure should be compelled to produce itself a self-consciousness. This would be to make the non-thetic consciousness a quality of positional consciousness (in the sense that the perception, positional consciousness of the table, would have as addition the quality of self-consciousness) and would thus fall back in to the illusion of the theoretical primacy of knowledge. This would be moreover to make the psychic event a thing and to qualify it with" conscious", just as I can qualify the blotter with "red". Pleasure cannot be distinguished--even logically--from consciousness of pleasure. Consciousness (of pleasure is constitution of pleasure as the very mode of its own existence, as the material of which it is made, and not as a form which is imposed by a blow upon a hedonist material.[9]

Though Sartre points out the problem of identifying mental states in his existential perspective, his contention is not off the mark, as he has clearly brought out the basic difficulty. If pleasure is not distinguishable from consciousness of pleasure, then knowledge of pleasure, in addition to pleasure, would require its description in language.

---

[9]. Sartre, J. P. *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by H. Barnes, New York Philosophical Liberary, 1956, p. 1iv.

And description of pleasure must involve relation of concepts in a synthetic proposition. Now if a person is experiencing pleasure, he might, on being asked, say, 'I am experiencing pleasure'. But if he is asked to *describe* his experience, he would only point out the experience again. It is not possible for him to say what pleasure is, in addition to what he is experiencing. In other words, a person is always at a loss in describing his own mental states under a general order. Thus, distinguishing pleasure as a mental state does not make it any more intelligible. And so is the case with rest of the so-called mental states.

The Question of Significance

Since the explanatory enigma of consciousness is too large a problem to be dealt with in this limited space, therefore, I would leave further questions pertaining to it to the philosophical minded to explore themselves. It suffices here to bring out some logical and explanatory impossibility, as above, for our perspectives.

However, there must be some consideration regarding the relevance of the problem for our understanding. I think what is at stake here is that *philosophy and science directly confront each other* on this singly question of the reality of human consciousness. If consciousness is not explainable through empirical sciences, which I have tried to bring out a little here, then we have reasons to believe in the possibility of philosophy itself. And this most radical aspect of the human reality is rescued from reductionism and scientism on *existential grounds*.

Besides this philosophical defense, there are other implications involved in our scientific zest for possibility of explanation of everything in terms of objectively comprehensible laws. One of these is our enthusiasm in adopting explanations that are really *unfit* for the kind of reality we live in. Our "objective" or scientific attitude towards natural phenomenon has penetrated into our human relationship as well. In this respect Strawson is concerned about human relationship.

> What I want to contrast is the attitude (or range of attitudes) of involvement in a human relationship, on the one hand, and what might be called the objective attitude (or range of attitudes) to another human being on the other...to adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him , perhaps, as an object of social policy; or a subject for what, in a wide range of cases, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account of ; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided....The objective attitude...cannot include the range of reactive feelings and attitudes which belong to involvement of participation with others in interpersonal relationship....If your attitude towards someone is wholly objective, then though you may fight him, you cannot quarrel with him, and though you may talk to him, even negotiate with him, you cannot reason with him. You can at most pretend to quarrel, or reason, with him.[10]

---

[10]. Strawson, P. F. *Freedom and Resentment and other Essays*, London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1974. p. 43

The human concern behind philosophical controversy has always remained an impetus for philosophy. Strawson's distinctions above show how our perspectives about human beings could be affected by adopting the reductionist approach towards man, by trying to explain his consciousness as a kind of structure to be dealt with rather than a subjectivity to be understood,

The present analysis points out the problem of explanation and does not solve it. Rather it claims that some domains of reality fall outside science and empiricism. Whether this is a legitimate claim depends on any successful explanation of consciousness by science, which, from the very logic of this paper, seems impossibility.

Thus, recognizing the *explanatory enigma* is one of the grounds for looking in some other direction for the explanation of human reality. This I believe is the very possibility of philosophy, given that our interpretations of human beings do not revert back to the irrational.