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Is consciousness epiphenomenal?

Comment on Susan Pockett

In a provocative article published in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Susan Pockett (2004) argues for the plausibility of considering consciousness as an epiphenomenon of neural activity. This means that consciousness, though caused by the brain, would not in its turn have any role in the causation of neural activity and, consequently, of behaviour. Critical for her argument is the distinction she makes between ‘consciousness *per se*’ and ‘the neural processing that accompanies it’ (p. 26). In her discussion, though, the author begs the question concerning whether there really is such ‘consciousness itself, *as distinct from the neural processing that goes with it*’ (p. 32, added emphasis). If consciousness as it exists happens *not* to be distinct from some sort of neural processing, then Pockett’s ‘consciousness *per se*’ has no causal effect simply because it does not exist.

However, let us consider the hypothesis that there is such consciousness ‘over and above the neural processing that accompanies it’ (p. 26). Let us suppose, following the author, that what we call consciousness really involves two things: consciousness *per se* and the neural processing associated with it; and that consciousness *per se* has no causal role in thought and action. Let us see if we may be convinced by the author that this supposition, even if not proved or provable, is plausible. The gist of her epiphenomenalism is given by the following quotation:

Certainly I could not type this paper if I were completely *unconscious*. However it seems to me a genuine possibility that this is simply because the nervous system state necessary for action such as typing is also a state which involves the generation of conscious sensations. This does not necessarily imply a causal relationship between the conscious sensations and the production of words. I know what I think only when I see what I write (p. 31).

The author rejects the idea that, since we can report the contents of consciousness, consciousness has a causal role at least in this action of reporting. She

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argues that in fact we *cannot* report these contents, since conscious experience is essentially private. She invites us to think about trying to explain to a colour-blind person what the colour red looks like to us (p. 33). It is certainly true that this is impossible, but it is also true that other contents of consciousness, such as verbal thoughts, are fully reportable — though not to a complete aphasic! It is true that we cannot describe the basic qualia of sensory experience. However, in order to say, or to think, that we cannot do so, we must be able to think about them. We are referring to our experience of red when we say it cannot be described. But how can we refer to it if, by assumption, it cannot have any causal effect on our thought? Pockett wants us to think about our experience of red as something ‘over and above’ the brain events that correlate with it and, further, to admit that this consciousness has no causal action whatsoever. But how can we think anything at all about this consciousness *per se* if what is affecting our thought are only the brain events?

The author writes: ‘All phenomenological description [...] relies [...] on *comparisons* between different experiences, each of which is intrinsically unreportable’ (p. 33). However, how can experiences be compared and a judgment be extracted from the comparison if they cannot influence our thought and action? Pockett would have to say that we are not really comparing the conscious experiences but the brain states that correspond to them. If this is so, however, how can we say that *there is* any consciousness *per se* if, when we think about any instance of it, we are really thinking about brain states?

The author’s initial assumption of a dissociation between ‘consciousness *per se*’ and neural activity appears clearly in the way she formulates certain points. For example, she thinks ‘it is difficult to see how consciousness could possibly break into the deterministic/random chain of events in the brain and impose a new direction on these’ (p. 23). If consciousness simply *is a part* of the chain of events in the brain, there is no difficulty at all. Discussing compatibilist conceptions of free will, she states that ‘my choosing to do something requires me (my consciousness) to adjust what is going on in my brain’; and she considers it hard to say how consciousness could do this (p. 24). There is no problem, however, if consciousness is part of what is going on in my brain.

In a footnote, the author mentions the possibility of considering consciousness as identical with (or a different aspect of) some feature of brain activity. However, she fails to seriously consider this hypothesis and merely states that it is ‘*incompatible with the existence of Free Will if genuine origination is required*’ (p. 24, n. 3). But why should a strange notion such as ‘*genuine origination*’ — the occurrence of an action that has no causal antecedent — be required?

The empirical and philosophical observations that Pockett adduces in her article may indeed be considered to support the thesis that it is not the function of consciousness directly to cause behaviour. However, this is not to say that it has no causal role in behaviour. Consciousness may usefully be considered to influence the other brain systems that directly cause behaviour. Her observations are also supportive of the view that the concept of what the author calls ‘consciousness *per se*’ is not useful for explaining any aspect of behaviour. Instead of being

driven to epiphenomenalism, however, it seems more reasonable to conclude that this concept of consciousness ‘as distinct from the neural processing that underlies it’ should simply be dropped, and consciousness be considered as identical with this neural processing.

It should be noted that Pockett’s epiphenomenalism does not necessarily imply mind–brain dualism. In a previous paper (Pockett, 2002), she considers the hypothesis that consciousness corresponds to certain spatio-temporal patterns in the electromagnetic field generated by the brain. If this electromagnetic field is too weak to influence any other aspect of brain function, or if its influence is unspecific, we would then have a monistic epiphenomenalism. The conscious aspects of the electromagnetic field would be a by-product of neural activity with no causal role in thought or action.

Pockett (2004, p. 38) imagines an experiment in which ‘a lump of consciousness’ would be artificially generated and thrown at a brain. (In this paper, she does not mention the electromagnetic field hypothesis but, if you wish, you may think of this ‘lump of consciousness’ as an electromagnetic field.) It would then be possible to see if it ‘causes the brain to make its body do something’. She considers it plausible that this superimposed consciousness could cause no behaviour at all.

Let us push this thought experiment a little further. Suppose someone is sitting in front of a glass of water but is not thirsty and consequently does not drink the water. Suppose now that a conscious feeling of thirst and a conscious desire to drink water are artificially created and superimposed on the person’s brain. However, only ‘consciousness *per se*’ is added, ‘as distinct from any brain processes’, so we must admit that her brain processes will go on unchanged. She will not take the glass and drink the water although she is conscious of being thirsty and wanting to drink. More than that, if you asked her ‘Are you thirsty?’ or ‘Do you want to drink water?’, she would have to say no, because her brain processes are not affected by the superimposed ‘consciousness *per se*’. Although conscious of being thirsty and wanting to drink, she would, on Pockett’s account, deny having any such consciousness! Does this still seem plausible?

References

- Pockett, Susan (2002), ‘Difficulties with the electromagnetic field theory of consciousness’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **9** (4), pp. 51–6.
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