

Escape From the Mind: Mental Life as Social Life¹

Clayton Morgareidge
Lewis & Clark College

I. Introduction

1. In order to clear up the mystery of how consciousness is possible, we do not need to await further scientific developments in the study of the brain. The reason for the explanatory gap is that we have supposed mental life to be a natural phenomenon occurring inside the minds or brains of individuals. Descartes believed that consciousness occurred in individual minds, which he took to be immaterial. If we abandon immaterial substances, then we seem forced to say that somehow consciousness arises from the chemical activity of that incredibly complex organ between our ears. But those who, as David Chalmers puts it, “take consciousness seriously”² find it hard to see how the thoughts and feelings you are having right now could be produced by a “piece of meat” you could put in a jar. Do we, then, have to await the discovery of some non-physical properties of brains that could explain how consciousness happens? My claim is that we already have the concepts necessary to render consciousness an intelligible feature of the world as we know it. They are staring us right in the face, for they belong to the category of the social. Mental activity is a feature of our social life, and it can be explained and understood only by participants in that social life. Thus consciousness is not something that occurs in individuals, any more than my bank balance is a feature of me as an individual. Nor is it a natural phenomenon, in the sense in which the natural is contrasted with what is socially constructed—consciousness is more like a banking transaction than a chemical reaction.

This paper aims to bring out a necessary condition for consciousness that has been forgotten by most philosophers of mind in recent years—a certain level of language and social life. To say that consciousness is a social phenomenon is not to claim that social life is *sufficient* for consciousness, since consciousness also requires a complex brain. But no account of how the brain works can, by itself, explain the occurrence of conscious mental life. That is the ontological puzzle this paper tries to solve: how can there be such a thing as conscious mental life in a

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² David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, 1996, pp. xii-xiii.

material world? The problem is solved by drawing attention to the fact that our world includes social facts and that attributing mental states to individuals is the *social act* of locating them in social relations with others. This recognition should close the explanatory gap.

2. I propose here to continue the project begun by Wittgenstein, Austin, and Ryle: the *critique* of folk psychology. Like Kant's Critiques, this one has both a positive and a negative aim. On the one hand, it attempts to *explicate* such concepts as belief, thought, intention, and feeling. This means calling attention to the way we actually use words like "believe" and "intend," bringing out their functions in ordinary practical activity. It is their practical use that gets overlooked when we think abstractly about thinking. Although the philosophers just mentioned draw attention to the practical function of mental concepts in ordinary life, the earlier analysis of mind and consciousness by George Herbert Mead actually goes further towards an explicitly social account of mind.

That's the positive side of the critique. The negative purpose is to relieve us of some fundamental misunderstandings or misleading images that abstract thought can foist upon us. It is these confused "pictures" (as Wittgenstein calls them) that lead us (and not only philosophers) to suppose that words like "belief" or "intention" refer to states or events going on inside the brains or minds of individuals and thus give rise to the impasse in the philosophy of mind. My hope is that a review of the social function of so-called mental concepts can lift us out of the swamp at the bottom of the explanatory gap.

II. Heart of the Hard Problem: Subjectivity

3. The feature of conscious mental life that is most difficult to locate in a purely physical universe, and which we therefore need most to clarify, is its *subjectivity*. There are two aspects of subjectivity that resist explanation. The first of these is *phenomenal consciousness*: How could any purely physical system experience the taste of a peach or the feeling of depression? For that matter, how could a non-physical entity have such experiences? It seems that no story about the objective facts of the world could explain how there can even *be* such a thing as what it's *like* to taste a peach or what it feels like, physically and emotionally, to give birth.

The subjectivity of mental life also appears in the *privileged access* each of us has to his or her own states of mind. You know me only externally, from outside; I know myself from the inside. Even if you could electronically scan every pattern of neural activity in my brain and were able to tell accurately what I was thinking, you would not know my thoughts as I do, for they would still be *my* thoughts, not yours.³ You would, at most, know *that* I am thinking that the band starts playing

³ Isn't a thought the same thought whether thought by me or by you? As a matter of logic, yes (leaving aside thoughts with indexicals); but as a subjective experience, every thought of mine is

at 9:00, and that's a different experience from thinking that the band starts playing at 9:00.

4. Subjectivity implies a subject. Not only is there something it is like to be in pain, but something is like *for* the one undergoing the pain. Privileged access means that *I*, the subject of my experience, am related to it in a way no one else can be. As Thomas Nagel writes, "every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view...."⁴ So while the problem of consciousness arises first as a problem about features of experience which appear only to the subjects of experience, it soon expands to include the problem of understanding how there can be *even be* subjects of experience, how human bodies can be or become subjects.

5. The solution to this mystery is to reject the assumption that the conscious mind is a product of the human brain or of any ethereal substitute for it. Consciousness is not secreted by any organ, physical or non-physical, belonging to the individual. Mental activity is social activity, and can be understood only from the point of view of those who participate in social practices and institutions. I will try to make this claim plausible by developing what I'll call a *parliamentary model* of mind.

III. From Mental facts to Social Facts

We must regard mind, then, as arising and developing within the social process, within the empirical matrix of social interactions....The processes of experience which the human brain makes possible are made possible only for a group of interacting individuals: only for individual organisms which are members of a society; not for the individual organism in isolation from other individual organisms.

George Herbert Mead⁵

6. It is mental states and acts that are conscious, but much mental activity is not conscious. We act on many beliefs, intentions, and feelings without being consciousness of them. As I climb the stairs to my study, I am conscious only of needing to vacuum them, though I also believe that the stairs lead to my study and I intend to go there to work on this paper. I may be, to others, observably jealous, angry or prejudiced without knowing it. So let's begin by developing a model of beliefs and intentions independently of their consciousness, and then consider what it is for them to be, or to become, conscious. It is only after we have this model in hand that we can approach the problem of phenomenal consciousness.⁶

bound up (cathected) with all my associated worries and hopes and memories. We are dealing here not with thoughts as abstractions but as occurring to individuals.

⁴ Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like To Be a Bat?" in *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates*, edited by Owen Flanagan, Ned Block, and Güven Güzeldere. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, p. 520.

⁵ Mead, G. H. *Mind, Self, and Society From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago, 1934, University Of Chicago Press, p. 133.

⁶ The most thorough discussion of phenomenal consciousness will be in the Objections and Replies section.

Material Intentionality

7. We must begin by dispensing with the words “mind” and “mental”. Their immediate association with their dualistic opposites (“body”, “matter”, “material”) quickly draws us back into the dualistic picture of human life we are trying to transcend—of the mind as a space where consciousness occurs. We are seeking to understand the special place of beliefs, intentions, and feelings in our world without reducing them to either of those ready-made categories—mind or body.

8. How, then, shall we characterize the activity that the word “mental” has been used to mark off? Let’s employ Brentano’s notion of intentionality. Thought, feelings, emotions and attitudes are about, or are directed to, objects and situations in the world. They are about things, though the things they are about need not exist. I can think about James Bond or Frodo; I can be afraid of events that never happen. Brentano regarded intentionality as a mark of the mental: "This intentional inexistence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it."⁷ But intentionality is quite at home in the material world. Many intentional activities are clearly bodily engagements with the physical world: waving, smiling, playing tennis, building houses, making lasagna, and giving advice. I can wave at someone who isn't there, or be making lasagna that never comes to be. These material activities are as referential, as much about the world, as my thoughts, desires and fantasies. They signify because they are woven into, and out of, the fabric of our form of life. Conversely, my thoughts and desires are referential because they too, I will argue, are material activities that belong to social life.

Intentionality, then, is not a feature of representations that refer to things; it’s the way that our activities engage us in the world. Heidegger calls these activities comportments ("Verhalten"). “Comportments have the structure of directing-oneself-toward, of being-directed-toward.” According to Dreyfus, “Heidegger uses 'comportment' to refer to our directed activity, precisely because the term has no mentalistic overtones”.⁸ I prefer Herbert Fingarette’s term *engagement*: our intentional activities are the ways we engage in the world.⁹ Making lasagna is an engagement in the world, part of the larger engagement of preparing the social occasion of dinner.

What makes it possible for our actions to be significant, to engage us in the world as they do? It is not merely that the movements of our bodies have effects on other things; nor is it that such movements are produced by events going on somewhere else—in our minds or brains. It is, rather, that our actions are

⁷ Cited by Güven Güzeldere in his Introduction to *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debate*, op. cit., p. 23.

⁸ Dreyfus, H. L. *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge, MA, 1995, MIT Press, p. 51.

⁹ Fingarette, H.. *Self-Deception*, Berkeley, 2000, University of California Press, pp. 40-41.

signifying elements in a framework of significance, i.e. in a culture. The movement of my hand as we approach each other is a greeting because we are members of a community that responds to (interprets) it as such. What is it that enables us to follow a play-by-play radio broadcast of a baseball game, or to see such a game as more than just bodies, bats and a ball in motion? What is it that turns a piece of wood into a bishop that moves and captures diagonally? It is that we are fellow-players (if only vicariously) of these games—baseball, chess, meeting and greeting, which, of course, are woven into the dense and complex fabric Wittgenstein called the language-game or our form of life. Our recognition of what people are doing occurs from the standpoint of fellow-players of the language game.

Believing in The Force Field of Social Life

9. Thirty-two pieces of wood on a square board. But to those who play and follow chess, they constitute a position, a field of forces. Black's queen threatens to attack white's rook but is now threatened by White's bishop which is protected by a pawn. Social space is like this—a force field—though infinitely more complex. Playing chess is a social practice whose norms create the fields of force that constitute a position.¹⁰ Social life, too, consists of multiple social practices whose norms determine the fields of force in which we live, move, and have our being.

10. Among the forces of social life are those exerted by our words, those that J.L. Austin called “illocutionary force.”¹¹ I perform the act of promising by saying “I promise;” the illocutionary force of those words is to obligate, to bind me to do what I have promised. They create a new social fact, a new position in the language-game, which others can now describe by saying “He promises.” Similarly, the illocutionary act performed by the words in a marriage ceremony or the words of a judge in passing sentence change people's relationships to others. They create new positions in the social force field, just as interposing a knight between the black queen and the white bishop changes the field of forces on the chessboard.

11. To say “I promise” is to *do* something, namely promise; it is not to *describe* myself as promising or to *report* any material fact about myself. Rather it creates a new *social* fact, an obligation. Moreover, it is an act that only I can perform. You can't promise for me. One might say I have privileged access to my own promises—but that would not mean I have special *knowledge* of them. I have privileged authority to bind myself by promising just as only I can move my chess pieces.

¹⁰ It is not the norms as written down or merely contemplated that create the fields of force chess players see on the board. It is those norms as embodied in the *habits* of the players.

¹¹ Austin, J. L.. *How To Do Things With Words*. Cambridge, Mass., 1975, Harvard University Press.

Austin's account of speech acts is modeled on parliamentary procedures in which certain verbal forms produce, definite effects, according to a set of rules which bind the debating body, like Roberts Rules of Order. We can extend this model to beliefs and intentions. If someone in a debate or a conversation says "p", she thereby asserts that p. The others can now say of her, "She claims, or holds, that p," and when they say this, they are locating her in social space as committed in the debate to the position that p. The others in the conversation now know how to take account of her in their assertions. They could just as well say of her that she *believes* that p. So on the parliamentary model, beliefs are positions in social space that one occupies by some overt act, such as checking a box on a questionnaire or saying "p." In these and other ways, one can signal the taking up of that position in social-discursive space, the language-game. Similarly, intending to do A is a position one comes to occupy by the act of deciding to do A, where deciding is achieved by saying (for example) "I'm going to do A." Intending to do A means that others can expect you to do so.¹²

IV. The Private Parliament

Still, thought remains, in its abstractest form, sublimated conversation. --George Herbert Mead¹³

12. The parliamentary context, however, seems inadequate as a model for all our thoughts and intentions. We do much of our thinking in silence and in private—"in our minds," as we often say. We think what we do not say, and we say what we do not think. The stillness of our thinking and the ubiquity of duplicity make it appear that thinking is not always or necessarily a social activity.

There are two arguments that must be made to show that thinking—and intentional activity in general—is social activity. First I will argue that the content and context of thought are rooted in the public world of language and society. Secondly, I will claim that the vehicle, or the matter, of thought is not a mental or neural event, but rather a significant gesture of the body.

13. First, with respect to content and context, let's observe that if our thoughts, however private they may be, are to have any grip on the world at all (i.e. have any content), then they are, as much as public statements are, positions

¹² This is a normative expectation: you are expected to keep your promises and to be logically consistent. Depending on a lot of background information, your having made a promise or an assertion will produce factual expectations: Others may take you at your word and make plans accordingly, but if they mistrust you, they may not. The production of factual expectations is what Austin calls the perlocutionary force of an utterance. The failure of an utterance to have the desired perlocutionary effect does not invalidate the illocutionary effect: I have made a promise and am obligated to keep it even if no one counts on my doing so.

These are not airtight or exact concepts: You have less right to complain if I don't perform having said I *intended* to do it than if I *promised* to. And context in all its rich particularity will have a lot to do with how bound I feel, and others feel, that I should do it.

¹³ G.H. Mead, *Selected Writings*, Edited by Andrew J. Reck, Indianapolis, 1964, Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill p. 102

in discursive space. That is, they occupy the force field constituted by other possible positions whose range is determined by logic and common sense, and by the pressure of actual positions taken by the significant others in one's life. No matter how silent and deviant they may be, my thoughts would mean nothing to me (and hence would not *be* thoughts) unless they stood in relation to the actual and possible thoughts of others.

14. The activity of solitary thinking, on our parliamentary model, is sublimated conversation. But since a conversation requires at least two parties, it turns out that the solitude is illusory. My private thinking, like my public utterances, occurs in a social *context*, within discursive fields of force. I bind myself with illocutionary force when I make a decision or reach a conclusion. Deciding what to do establishes an intention which stands until and unless I decide differently.¹⁴ Deciding that something is the case establishes a belief by which I am governed until I am persuaded otherwise.¹⁵

It is clear that we do not think alone. If, in talking to myself, the self to whom I speak were really identical with the self who speaks, the conversation would be completely boring and useless.¹⁶ Of course this is rarely a problem. There are always plenty of “voices” to contend with us—the voice of the guilty conscience obsessed with the past, the one reminding of us of our still unfinished tasks and obligations, the arguments and attitudes of our philosophical and political opponents, the assumed attitudes of our neighbors, our lusts, appetites, angers and fears.¹⁷

15. But however public the form of our thinking is, the parliamentary model seems unable to locate the concrete material action of solitary thinking in the public world. A move in a public language-game, like a debate, has to have an overt and observable gesture—raising a hand or saying “aye”. If the gesture goes unobserved, nothing has been done. But you may well be actively thinking when to all appearances you could be merely dozing. So whatever activity does constitute your thinking would seem to be located inside you—in your brain or in your mind. No matter how symbolic and socially engaged it may be, it seems to be going on in an interior place. Moreover, you may never tell anyone these thoughts, or you may lie about them.

It's true that some signifying activity must be going on in the body, but I want to suggest that this bodily activity is not as *far* inside us as the mind-brain

¹⁴ Thus I can have a mind—that can be “made up” and changed—only insofar as I am *principled*.

¹⁵ Thought is a public activity not only because its *content* makes reference, through rigid designation, to contingent facts in the external world, but also because the *act* of thinking is the taking of a position in social space occupied by the thoughts (positions) of others.

¹⁶ Try as we might to eliminate the presence of others in the life of the mind, “we can only do it to some other audience with whom our thought holds converse....” Even if this audience is “only the I and the Me of actual thought,...behind these protagonists stand the chorus of others to whom we rehearse our reasonings by word of mouth or though the printed page.” (Mead, SW 103-04, emphasis added).

¹⁷ If you think you are a unity, try concentrating your attention for ten minutes entirely on one thing—your breath or a candle flame.

model suggests. This is because thinking is a more embodied engagement in the world than we philosophers usually suppose.

16. The human animal is a living being always seeking a course of action, a path forward in a physically and socially constituted world of problems and obstacles. Deliberating about what to do, whether done by a committee or a single individual, consists of trying on and refining contending ways of engaging a situation, until one of them is released into action. Consider the wild dog George Pitcher patiently worked to befriend after she'd had a litter of pups under his tool shed.

It was clear that she was tempted by the biscuit but that she simply could not bring herself to approach a human being.... Each of these sessions ended in the same way: after ten or fifteen minutes of weighing my blandishments, she turned and crept back to her lair.

...

Days passed with no thaw in her massive distrust of me.... One afternoon when I looked into the cave, I found her, for the first time, not hidden away in utter darkness but crouching only a foot or two from where I knelt... I wanted to reach out and touch her, but I couldn't risk it. She turned her head away, and I thought she would creep to the back of the cave, but no, she held her ground. In a moment, she began to wag her tail ever so slowly. It thumped against the side of the cave.¹⁸

The dog's ambivalence--attraction and distrust, approach and withdrawal--are legible to Pitcher in her posture, until finally the conflict is resolved in favor of the approach in response to his. Our own decision-making is similar in that it involves standing experimentally in various positions until one of them is put into action. I cast my eye over the rocky hillside ahead and the path I select is the one that pulls my feet forward. I try out various ways of starting this paragraph or organizing this argument, testing them against the likely responses of my intended audience, until one flows from my fingertips onto the screen.

17. As we maneuver through the social and discursive force fields of our lives, we arrive at (more or less firmly held) beliefs and intentions. Each of these is an orientation of our activity in the world, a way of engaging with people and things as these are articulated in the language-game. We are material beings living in a material world, so our orientations and activities are physical. So we should think of the connection between our thoughts and our actions in a very physical way. A striking form of this connection is the way sexual thoughts trigger sexual arousal; this is because the sexual thought is already the initiation of sexual activity, a "leaning towards" the object of one's desire. (Of course most of us are skilled at restraining these leanings so that they do not become obvious at inappropriate moments.) The thought that the occupation of Iraq is a disastrous policy threatens to engage one in political action, even if that impulse

¹⁸ Cited in Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge, 2001, Cambridge University Press, p. 121.

is overridden by other commitments. The same connection holds for perception. Seeing that this is a book, Mead says, involves the physical readiness to take it up or read it whether or not I actually do so. Seeing a boulder may involve “a tendency of the eye to follow the curving line and to arrest its movement with its breaks in the contour. We may catch the finger in a readiness to follow a like path”.¹⁹

18. Human thought, unlike the dog’s, can take very long detours through what Lacan called “the defiles of the signifier” before permitting the release of impulse into overt action. Symbolic activity, however, is nevertheless *activity* and must occur in the body even if no bodily motion is detectable by others.²⁰ As symbolic, this activity has to be conceived as consisting of *gestures* which function by being interpreted. For Mead, these gestures are precisely sublimated conversation, the damped-down or suppressed impulses to speak. Mead writes,

Ideas, as distinct from acts, or as failing to issue in overt behavior, are simply what we do not do; they are possibilities of overt responses which we test out implicitly in the central nervous system and then reject in favor of those which we do in fact act upon or carry into effect.²¹

When we think silently, we let play the impulses to say first one thing and then another in response. It is not always impulses to speak that contend with each other for release; often they are impulses linked to other possible actions—melodies, steps in a cooking or carpentry job, or social gestures. But when we do think discursively, we are searching for something we will be willing to say, if only to ourselves; and what we would be willing to say, i.e. what we believe, is what we, at least tentatively, would be willing to act on.

19. We can now say something about the place of the brain in thinking. The body is a signifying system in so far as its acts are significant gestures, i.e. gestures that call out other gestures by being part of a shared signifying system. So if one had good neuroscientific reasons for supposing that a particular brain state was the material correlate of a particular thought, it would be *the discursive position of the social act which that brain state produced* that made it the thought that it was. But in that case, why say that it is the brain state *simpliciter* that constitutes the thought, rather than the whole signifying state of the body in its engagement in the social and discursive world? Thinking requires the brain in the same way that having money requires some material substratum—paper currency or bank records. That I have ten dollars in my pocket is centrally a fact about my position in social space and only secondarily about the paper currency. Similarly, my belief that today is Wednesday is essentially a fact about my position in social space and only secondarily about the state of my brain. We will be able to get clear about the relations between the brain and mental activity only when mental activity is understood as social activity.

¹⁹ Mead, *Selected Writings*, pp. 125 and 126.

²⁰ It is, however, surprising how much some people can read from the body language of those whose verbal behavior is absent or deceptive.

²¹ Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, p. 99.

20. Thoughts and intentions, then, do not stand outside our engagement in the world. We are tempted by the fact that we keep secrets and tell lies to imagine a place for thoughts to go on inside us, apart from the outside world. Some things we do “only in our minds.”²² But the fact that we have thoughts that are not accessible to others is a social and political fact, not an ontological one.²³ There are procedures we learn for maintaining secrecy. A committee meets behind closed doors. The liar speaks one thing to us and another when we can’t hear. We all have reasons not to communicate many of our thoughts to others, and we develop the skill of selective self-disclosure. But what it is that we do not disclose is nevertheless a real bodily activity or posture which we must take pains to disguise or dissemble.²⁴ My impulse is to frown, but I force my face into a smile. Your ignorance of what, if anything, the silent person sitting across from you on the bus is thinking is no different in kind from your ignorance of what is written in the book he is holding.²⁵

V. Consciousness

21. I have tried to recast mental life as ways of being engaged in social and discursive space.²⁶ But it is time now to address the question of their consciousness: What is the difference between merely being engaged in some activity, like singing a song, and doing it consciously, or having a headache and being aware of the headache? (I will make no distinction between consciousness and awareness.) What constitutes the dawning of consciousness? What “makes the lights go on?”

22. I have many beliefs, intentions and feelings without being aware of them (see §6 above). I can drive without being conscious of the curve of the road;

²² Steve Martin: “I’ve decided to take up juggling. Now I know what you’re thinking: ‘But Steve, how do you find time to juggle?’ Well, I *juggle in my mind!*.”

²³ “In bourgeois society, Sorel asserts, the measured relation between thought and action constitutes an essential *duplicity*. Thought begins with concealment and, following the inevitable delay of calculation, ends in deceptive action. Thus, thinking is identified with a private, i.e. hidden process. Men are careful not to think “out loud” for fear of exposing their mercenary intentions and, in public, candor is generally taken for a form of madness. If men are to successfully compete with, and exploit their fellows, they must not reveal their calculations; the mind must be treated as a vault. Taken from the standpoint of the *other*, actions appear as maneuvers that cannot be easily understood because they dissimulate, often as not, the hidden intent of the action.

“The Cartesian dualism (mind-body) can be conceived as a philosophic elaboration of mercantile duplicity. The ‘other mind’ problem is not a matter of logical inaccessibility but of calculated appearances. This duplicity is the prime target of [Sorel’s] critique of bourgeois decadence.” Jerry Boime, *Violence and Utopia: The Work of Jerome Boime*, edited by Albert Boime (New York: 1996, University Press of America), p. 133.

²⁴ More precisely, I hide my thoughts or feelings by suppressing their signifiers, their “outward criteria”.

²⁵ The same is true of the never-to-be-spoken thoughts of a dying person or those of people paralyzed by strokes.

²⁶ This recasting is not a reductionistic account; if anything it is an *expansionist* account, for it locates the “mental” in a much larger context than we usually afford it, rather than shrinking it down to fit something less than it seems to be, e.g. neural activity.

I can speak louder to be heard above the crowd without noticing that I'm doing so. This might lead us to say that consciousness consists of noticing, focusing on, or attending to the object. But these are visual metaphors that continue to suggest a mental gaze or a mind's eye, so they don't relieve us of the model we are trying to escape. We can begin to apply our parliamentary model by suggesting that to become conscious of something is to bring it up for discussion, to name it, to "spell it out".²⁷ When we do this, we bring to bear on it the resources of our language and the viewpoints of others. We make it the topic of conversation, whether that conversation be public or private.

23. Becoming conscious of X, or that p, is, of course, not just making a gesture that indicates X, or that p, to others. The thermometer is not conscious that it's 68 degrees.²⁸ What is also required is that the gesture have the same significance for me, the maker of the gesture, as it does for you, the audience.²⁹ Now this cannot mean that you and I have the *same* response to the gesture, since our responses to the same gesture understood in the same way will likely be quite different. Rather, my telling you that p, or pointing out X, prepares us for a range of appropriate actions, a spectrum of responses, the way a move in a chess game changes the range of possible responding moves in the game, or the way an election outcome alters the political situation. My utterance, then, is a move in the language-game that changes the state of play for both of us. It does so because, and to the extent that, we inhabit the same social-discursive space, are bound by the same linguistic and social norms. Our words and gestures have a common meaning because we share the habits and the practices that constitute the use of language.

24. We noticed in §14 that even when we speak to ourselves in solitude, we are in the presence of others because we speak their language and respond to their expectations.³⁰ The converse of this is also true: when we speak to others, we also speak to ourselves.³¹ We hear our own words and respond to them as others would. But when I hear what I have just said, I don't respond like an echo, as I would if I were a unanimous single thing.³² What enables me to hear and respond to my words as my own interlocutor? I am able to function as two or more parties to a conversation by the device of role-playing, taking first one part

²⁷ Fingarette, pp. 34-47.

²⁸ Nor is the hen pecking at a grub and thereby indicating the grub to her chicks conscious that there is a grub (Mead's example). If this seems wrong, it's because of a confusion caused by a different use of "conscious" to mean no more than *responsive (to)*. This sense of "consciousness" is closely related to our use of it to distinguish between being awake and asleep as in "She's regaining Cs". In *that* sense the hen is consciousness of (responsive to) the grub.

²⁹ For a much more adequate account of these matters than I can give here, see Mead's paper titled (misleadingly for us) "A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol," in *Selected Writings*, pp. 240-47. See also his *Mind, Self and Society*, Parts II-III.

³⁰ "Respond" does not mean *conform*: We may well respond to others' expectations with defiance!

³¹ "Articulate sounds have... [a] most important result. While one feels but imperfectly the value of his own facial expression or bodily attitude for another, his ear reveals to him his own vocal gesture in the same form that it assumes to his neighbor. One shakes his fist primarily only at another, while he talks to himself as really as he talks to his vis-à-vis" (*Selected Writings*, pp. 136-37).

³² Looked at in this way, Descartes own doubting should have led him to doubt that he was the same *I*, the same thinking thing, in all his thoughts, since doubting betrays a duality in the soul.

and then another, assuming diverse sets of attitudes. I monitor what I say from the points of view of the people who matter to me—my immediate audience, my significant others, Public Opinion, and the idealized perspective of God, Reason, the Law, or Science.³³ This dynamic, dramaturgical activity is what constitutes my consciousness. Consciousness dawns with the ability to assume different roles from which the subject can spell out, comment upon, and revise his or her engagements. I am conscious of something insofar as I am in conversation about it.

25. Now in order to bring out fully the subjectivity of consciousness experience, we need to think about what constitutes an individual as a person in the language-game that is our social life. A game of chess can be abstracted from the players, and a mathematical proof can be abstracted from its inventor. But in the game of life, our identities are as much elements of the game as the king and queen are elements in chess. It matters *who* has spoken or acted. Thus the salience of proper names and personal pronouns: they serve to attach social acts to individuals, to claim and assign responsibility. This is why I have privileged authority over my speech acts: I am the *one* who is held responsible for them.

The performative priority each of us has in speaking and acting in our lives as social agents extends to the body's expression of itself in speech. The language of self-expression—descriptions of how we feel—is grafted on to the natural responses of the body. As Wittgenstein puts it, "A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behavior".³⁴ It is in this way that the body becomes a signifying system, that organic needs are drawn into the defiles of the signifier (to put it in Lacanian terms). The pain I report, the thrill I get from a Fats Waller bass line, the way I felt when 9/11 happened, are mine, not because they happen inside me where only I can be acquainted with them and report on them, but because they *are* the utterances of my body. As Ryle remarks, only I can feel my pains for the same reason that only I can smile my smiles. So the subjectivity of our experience is the authority we have as persons, as players in the language-game, over our engagements and the expressions of our bodies.

26. I want to bring out one more reason that conscious experience seems impossible to locate in the natural world. Consciousness seems to give us a world that extends both from us and far beyond us, but a world from which we ourselves can seem to be missing. Having mastered a language whose resources enable me to give an objective account of the universe, suppose I then ask where *I* am in this universe? Every fact about the individual who is called "Clayton Morgareidge" will be there, along with the facts about everyone else. But nothing in this history will reveal something I *know* to be true, namely that *I* am Clayton Morgareidge and *not* one of the other characters. So even though *I* know who I

³³ These last are manifestations of what Mead calls the "Generalized Other."

³⁴ Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, 1963, Blackwell, §244

am, I seem to be missing from the objective world.³⁵ But since I cannot deny my own conscious existence, I am forced to grant myself some status outside the world. Simply calling myself a purely mental thing does not help the case if mental things are just another kind of entity to be included in the objective account of the universe. So the self has to be regarded as transcendental, with Kant—or, with the early Wittgenstein, as something that shows itself in the world without being a constituent of it.

This disappearance of the subject from the objective world is not a product of discourse in general, but, rather, as Nagel has pointed out, of the drive towards objectivity, towards a world described from no point of view. This objective account of the world therefore eschews indexicals—pronouns and demonstratives that can only be understood from *somewhere*. This is why *I* am missing from it. The self can be re-established in the world by acknowledging that reality is always presented from some point of view and that “ultimate reality” is the name we give the world as it will be narrated by the final successor of earlier and partial perspectives—a concept that has only heuristic value.

This is not some sort of radical subjectivism, but is simply what we experience in practical life everyday: For me to understand what you are saying when you use words like “here”, “there”, “this”, “I”, and “you”, I have to be know where you’re standing so that I can put myself in your position; I count on you to do the same in order to understand me. In science and philosophy, we attempt to produce the most general accounts of things and those capable of being received by the most diverse audiences. But the indexical-laden language of everyday practical life remains essential to the lives of those who engage in the practices of science and philosophy.

The world does not exist for me as a separate individual, but only for me as a member of a community with whom I share a collective engagement in our world. There can be *a world* for me only because I partake in the common practices of organizing the world—practices which include not just naming and describing things, but building them, linking them (with highways, for example), marking them, storing them, pricing them, owning them, and wielding them to perform an indefinitely large range of actions. It is as I come to learn my way around in this common world that consciousness dawns and the world is created.

There can be a world *for me* only when I am able to take responsibility for my claims about it. I am conscious of my place as an individual in our world in so

³⁵ Hume marvels, in §2 of the *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, that “the thought can in an instant transport us into the most distant regions of the universe...”, but when writing about personal identity in the *Treatise*, he can find no such thing as the self in that universe. Nagel asks, “How can a particular person be me? Given a complete description of the world from no particular point of view, including all the people in it, one of whom is Thomas Nagel, it seems on the one hand that something has been left out, something absolutely essential remains to be specified, namely which of them I am. But on the other hand there seems no room in the centerless world for such a further fact: the world as it is from no point of view seems complete in a way that excludes such additions; it is just the world, and everything true of TN is already in it” (*The View from Nowhere*, pp. 54-55). See also Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by C.K. Ogden, London, 1922, §5.631.

far as I can exert illocutionary force, stake out my position with the pronoun “I” in relation to the positions of others. In order to do this, I have to be able to recognize myself as the person you address as “you.” Thus I treat you and me as inhabiting, and responsible for, the same social-discursive space.

Thus our consciousness of ourselves as unique in the vastness of the universe can be understood as our capacity to be active as individual participants in our collective engagement with the world which that engagement creates.³⁶ So rather than dividing the world into objective and subjective realms, one from which I am absent and the other of which seems to reduce the world to me alone, we need to understand the world as one which is experienced by us as a community constituted by the significant-signifying activities of we individuals who are constituted by it.

27. There is one last residue of mystery to consider. We may wonder *what it is like to become* conscious.

To become conscious is, on this account, to acquire a complex of skills, skills that are exercised in cooperation with others. One could no more be conscious in isolation from others than a hermit could be a banker or a tennis player. Perhaps becoming conscious can be compared with the way a page of print or a situation in a game becomes immediately legible, or transparent, once you have been sufficiently trained in the language or the rules of the game. You no longer have to translate from the marks on the page or the tokens on the board to the content of the writing or the situation in the game. You just look and see what the print says, or the threat to black’s queen. Now imagine moving from having no language to having one. Of course this is *not* imaginable, and that is perhaps one reason why the dawning of consciousness seems to escape our understanding. We can’t know what it was like to become conscious because there is nothing it is like not to be conscious. But this at least renders the mystery unmysterious.

VI. Objections and Replies

Objection I. *Animals alone in the forest are hungry, frightened, or hurt: they feel hunger, fear, and pain. These feelings are forms of consciousness. So the capacity to engage in signifying activity using a common language is not necessary in order to be conscious.*

Reply: Animals perceive their surroundings and feel the conditions of their bodies in the sense that they respond to them in very complex ways, but it does

³⁶ The poet David Emmons has written, “The world chisels in words that chisel the world,” but we should add that the world chisels also in freeways and IMF loans that in turn have massive impact on the signifying lives of human subjects.

not follow from that responsiveness that they are aware, or conscious, of what they feel or see. Why call that animal responsiveness “consciousness”?

“Because there’s something it’s like to have it.”

How do you know that?

Because there’s something it’s like for me to feel pain!”

Your consciousness of pain is not in question. I’ve given (what seems to me) a reasoned explanation of what being conscious of something consists of, an explanation that rules out consciousness in the case of non language-using animals. To demonstrate that animals are conscious, you would have to show me what’s wrong with my explanation other than that it violates an unargued intuition—one which, I agree, we all share. I’ll say more about this intuition in replying to Objection IV.

Objection II. *The really hard question about consciousness is not about thoughts and intentions, which do occupy social and discursive space, but about phenomenal experience which has the qualities it has independently of discourse and communication. When pain or fear is experienced by an animal or a small child, something occurs in the organism, and that something has a quality, a phenomenal feel. This subjectively experienced quality is what it is regardless of whether its bearer is able to use general symbols. A child’s pain, as a quale, remains the same after we have taught it “new pain behavior.” So phenomenal consciousness does not require or depend upon our engagement in social-discursive space.*

Reply: Of course any event occurring in a nervous system has physical qualities, such as duration and electrical charge, as well as relational qualities—a tendency to cause increased heart-rate, for example. But on what grounds do we claim that a neural event has some quality *for* the creature who has it if that creature has no capacity to make truth claims? How can event E have quality Q *for* S if S has no power to attribute Q to E? The lamp is hot; we are not tempted to say that the lamp *feels* hot (except to us). The hotness does not exist for the lamp. Suppose the lamp is equipped with a fan that is switched on by a thermostat when the temperature reaches a certain point. Would we say then that the lamp is aware of being hot, or that the heat of the lamp was a felt quality for the lamp? If not, why should we say that events occurring in a wounded ant, salamander, or bear have subjective qualities?

Only a creature that has acquired the linguistic, communicative capacity to attribute qualities to things, to *say* of something that it is \emptyset , and *not* something else, can be conscious, or aware, that something has a quality. Moreover, to affirm a proposition is to exert illocutionary force, to locate oneself in social-discursive space, and thus to take a position in relation to the possible and actual positions of others. To put it in Kantian terms, qualities exist only for creatures who have concepts, and concepts are forms of judgment. So only those able to

form judgments have subjective experience. What could it mean to say that there are subjectively experienced qualities for animals that are innocent of any discursive structure? How are such qualities suppose to exist? The friends of qualia appear to be in the grip of an inarticulate intuition—what Wittgenstein calls a “picture”.³⁷

Objection II rejoined: *Can you really believe that there is nothing it is like for a solitary bear to be hungry or in pain?*

Reply: It isn’t easy; our intuitions press us to imagine the bear’s mental state on the model of our own. (More about these intuitions below.) But when we reflect on the matter, how can there be something it is like to be \emptyset for a being that cannot ask, think, or say what it’s like to be \emptyset , that does not locate \emptyset in any logical space, that has no use for the concept \emptyset or any concept at all? The phrase “what it’s like to be...” is of use only for those who can ask and answer comparative questions. To insist that there must be something it is like to be \emptyset for the snake or the bear is to insist on a picture for which one can supply no application.

Objection III: *But don’t we need the conscious feeling of pain in order to make sense of the difference between really being in pain and the most perfect simulation of pain? Suppose there were a computerized robot that gave every sign of being in pain in the appropriate circumstances. It wouldn’t really be in pain—or at least it would be separate question whether it was. So to believe that another is in pain is to postulate the occurrence of something within her that exceeds what is observable.*

Reply: The robot example tries to generate the mystery of consciousness by representing consciousness as something ontologically distinct from and independent of everything in the material world. The zombie fantasy works the same way. We are asked to imagine a thing that acts exactly like an ordinary human being and yet lacks consciousness. The invitation uncritically represents consciousness as an epiphenomenon, ungrounded, except by constant conjunction, in anything in the material world. Thus the objectively observable, material world could go on exactly as it is with or without that weird phenomenon of consciousness. What’s wrong with this ontological division? Judgments about consciousness are first and foremost *affective responses to* and *action-guiding assessments of* someone’s situation, not *descriptions of* phenomena, “epi-” or otherwise.³⁸ This does not appear to us at first because the material descriptions of being in pain philosophers typically consider are too thin to elicit the affective response and practical assessment.

³⁷ “Being unable—when we surrender ourselves to philosophical thought—to help saying such-and-such; being irresistibly inclined to say it—does not mean being forced into an *assumption*, or having an immediate perception of knowledge of a state of affairs” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §299).

³⁸ Rather as the judgment that X is *important* is based upon, but is more than, a factual claim about X. Similarly the judgment that this dish is hot (spicy) is more than a claim about the amount of capsaicin as measured on the Scoville scale.

Let's try to provide a schema for a thicker description of being in pain. The robot and zombie stories try to get down to what pain really is—"in the last analysis"—by stripping away the normal surroundings in which pain occurs until nothing is left but an internal something, a sheer moment of phenomenal consciousness which is independent of the bearer's relationship to its surroundings or even its body (the zombie case). But just as we would not study the functioning of the human hand by examining severed hands, so we should not investigate pain by looking at what is left of it when abstracted from the life activities in which it plays a role. *Pain* is an abstraction; what we need to study is the phenomenon of *being in pain*, or *hurting*.

Here are three features of being in pain as a material phenomenon:

1. Being in pain, or hurting, is the living body's response to damage—a striving to cease being hurt. This striving takes two forms: evasion, flight, or withdrawal from the source of the hurt; and calling out for help from others.³⁹
2. Being in pain is a form of perception registered in the affected part, rather like taste and touch. However, pain is more fully embedded in evasive and communicative action than are other forms of perception.⁴⁰
3. A body in pain evokes, or calls out, a response in others—to join in the sufferer's efforts to cease being hurt. This is as much part of primitive pain behavior as the efforts of the one in pain.

Now consider two ways in which you can confront the pain of another.

- a. You share the situation in which the other is hurt, struggling, and crying out. You wince and grimace at her embodied pain; you identify with her condition and become part of the struggle to help her.
- b. The pain of the other is narrated to you. The words of the narration are not names and descriptions of bodily or mental states inside the one who is or was in pain. They are, rather, like a verbal cloak you are invited to put on so that you may reenact, and respond to, the condition of the one who spoke them, the one from whom they were forced by her condition. By modeling in your own body her words and actions as narrated, you identify with her condition; you take on her

³⁹ Viewing pain as an inner phenomenon shows a lack of respect for it: it introduces pain as something whose qualities can be observed—rather as we might savor the qualities of wines. But the *first* thing to notice about pain is that it wracks the body, bringing other activities to a halt. Pain is not the *occasion* for crying out, not what one winces and cries out *about*; being in pain is being forced to wince and cry out. Being in pain is an emergency situation, not an opportunity for contemplation. See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, 1985.

⁴⁰ Pain is intentional. It has two referents: the hurting body and relief.

position. (This is called imagining what the other is feeling.) Again, you are enrolled, if only imaginatively, in the struggle to escape the pain.⁴¹

Animals, human or not, can be in pain whether or not they are able to narrate their condition and thereby make it an object for themselves. Pain is not essentially a conscious experience.

Objection III rejoined: *Suppose the creature you confront as described in (a), or the creature who narrates its condition as in (b), turns out to be a robot. You would then have the affective reaction and action-guiding judgment indicated in (3), and yet, in fact, the creature all along was not in pain. So pain is, after all, more than what's covered by your three features no matter how thickly described.*

Reply: The phrase “in fact” functions as an editing tool: it inserts a new element into the narration, thereby altering my response. I no longer make the judgment that the creature is in pain when I learn that it is an robot (or an actor) simulating pain.

Is this because you don't feel affection for robots? Or is it because you believe that constructions out of silicon and other minerals can't feel pain?

Both. When something is presented to me as a robot, it no longer has the “civil status” of a person, but becomes instead a piece of property. It is not the robot that needs or desires help; it is the owner that wishes it to be repaired.

But notice that a parallel shift from person to object occurs if the human being before me is reductively described as a complex bio-chemical entity. Under that description, too, it is difficult to maintain the “attitude that it has a soul” and thus to believe that it might be in pain. This is the source of the mind-body problem: when humans and animals are described in a vocabulary that omits our engagement in their social lives, there is nothing in them with which we can identify, and it is this capacity for identification that is required for seeing them as conscious or as suffering.

Suppose that what you took to be a robot simulating pain turns out later to be a living animal suffering real pain? You then realize, do you not, that something was all along occurring in the animal over and above its behavior. The behavior provokes your sympathy only if you believe that it is accompanied by the phenomenal experience of pain.

The conclusion establishes the occurrence of an inner conscious experience only by evoking the intuition that that's what (really) being in pain is. It is just this intuition that is in question here. Of course there was pain before I realized the animal was alive, but this doesn't require me to endorse the intuition that pain is an inner subjective experience. When I learn this is a real animal, I extend

⁴¹ This helps us to understand how we identify with characters in fiction.

my sympathetic response back in time, just as we do when we learn that a friend whom we thought was happy was actually in great sorrow or anxiety.

Objection IV: *If animals are not conscious of their suffering, then what's wrong with torturing them or allowing them to live in pain?*

Reply: Being in pain does not require consciousness. It is not consciousness of pain that makes a dog struggle and cry out; these are its response to being hurt. Our judgment that the dog is in pain is not a factual claim about what's going inside the dog (mentally or physically), but is rather an action-guiding response (addressed to oneself and others) born of our identification with the dog's condition and our impulse to help.⁴² It is wrong to make animals suffer because it violates our sympathetic response to the conditions of others that is at the heart of our morality.

When we see a fellow human being in pain, our understanding and sympathy is more complex because the consciousness of pain makes the pain more complex. I have not only your wincing and your cries to guide me in my identification with you, but your words guide me into what your condition feels like and your concerns about the future. Pain, especially severe pain, is terrifying to us because it threatens the structure of the self. It threatens to destroy one's world.⁴³

Even if you say nothing articulate in the throes of your pain, it will be natural for me to imagine your thoughts about your condition—what I might feel if I were in your shoes. And if I can do this for temporarily inarticulate people, it is a small step to doing it for an animal as well. It is easy to advance from identification with the animal's immediate condition of being hurt to imagining its fear of death and the consciousness of self which that fear entails. This underlies, I think, our intuition that there must be something it is like for an animal to be in pain. More generally, we read the non-verbal gestures of other people against the background of their presumed positions in discursive social space, and it is easy for most of us to do the same for animals—which is why fairy tales and comic strips about talking, thinking animals make sense.

⁴² Of course this impulse and identification can be overridden by contrary interests and impulses such as cruelty or anger.

⁴³ Again, see Scarry, *op. cit.*.