

**CONSCIÊNCIA COMO PRÉ-REQUISITO PARA CIÊNCIA E RELIGIÃO**

## CONSCIOUSNESS AS A PREREQUISITE FOR SCIENCE AND RELIGION

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**Resumo**

Filosoficamente, a principal preocupação hoje é a de como conciliar a compreensão de senso comum de nós mesmos como agentes intencionais, conscientes, com uma visão naturalista do cosmos, segundo o qual o cosmos é não-teleológico, não-intencional, e consistindo de processos não mentais. Uma estratégia, para os naturalistas, tem sido negar a compreensão de nós mesmos própria do senso comum. Neste ensaio, a realidade da consciência, da intencionalidade, é afirmada como sendo mais certa do que a existência e a natureza dos objetos e eventos físicos independentes da mente. Os filósofos, que em nome da ciência, procuram eliminar a consciência não percebem que não pode haver ciência sem cientistas, seres conscientes e intencionais. O reconhecimento da primazia da consciência bloqueia uma estratégia naturalista, levando-nos a considerar explicações não-naturalistas como o teísmo e como algumas das objeções ao teísmo podem ser combatidas, uma vez reconhecida a robusta realidade da consciência.

**Palavras-chaves:** Naturalismo; teísmo; consciência; Daniel Dennett; Jaegwon Kim; John Searle; Wesley Wildman; Herman Philipse.

**Abstract**

A key concern philosophically today is how to square our common sense understanding of ourselves as intentional, conscious agents with a naturalist view of the cosmos, according to which the cosmos is non-teleological, non-purposive, and consisting of mind-less processes. One strategy has been for naturalists to deny the common sense understanding of ourselves. In this essay, the reality of conscious, intentionality is affirmed as being more certain than the existence and nature of mind-independent physical objects and events. Philosophers who in the name of science seek to eliminate consciousness do not appreciate that there cannot be science without scientists, conscious, purposive selves. Recognizing the primacy of consciousness blocks one naturalist strategy, leaving us open entertain non-naturalist accounts like theism, and some of the objections to theism can be countered once we recognize the robust reality of consciousness.

**Keywords:** Naturalism; theism; consciousness; Daniel Dennett; Jaegwon Kim; John Searle; Wesley Wildman; Herman Philipse.

John Searle aptly states our current philosophical predicament. “There is exactly one overriding question in contemporary philosophy... How can we square this self-conception of ourselves as mindful, meaning-creating, free, rational, etc, agents with a universe that consists entirely of mindless, meaningless, unfree, non rational, brute physical particles?” (Searle 2013, 22). My own response to this question is to propose that the difficulty of squaring this concept of ourselves with a naturalist view of the cosmos, is some reason to think that the naturalist view of the cosmos is false. Perhaps if we take seriously the reasonable understanding of ourselves and other animals as mindful, meaning-creating, free, rational, and so on, we should question whether indeed our cosmos is utterly mindless, meaningless, unfree, nonrational and solely a matter of brute physical particles.

Fully justifying this response goes beyond the scope of this paper, but I hope to make some progress toward such a response by calling into question a project that charges that our mindful concept of ourselves as conscious selves is itself an illusion created by our mindless cosmos. My intent is therefore to cut-off an important naturalist strategy to defuse the arduous difficulty that Searle’s question poses.

#### THE PLACE OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN CURRENT PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

Consider this lengthy passage on the state of play philosophically on the nature of consciousness by a leading philosopher of mind, Jaegwon Kim:

For most of us, there is no need to belabor the centrality of consciousness to our conception of ourselves as creatures with minds. But I want to point to the ambivalent, almost paradoxical, attitude that philosophers have displayed toward consciousness... Consciousness had been virtually banished from the philosophical and scientific scene for much of the last century and consciousness bashing still goes on in some quarters, with some reputable philosophers arguing that phenomenal consciousness, or “qualia” is a fiction of bad philosophy. And there are philosophers... who, while they recognize phenomenal consciousness as something real do not believe that a complete science of human behavior, including cognitive psychology and neuroscience, has a place for consciousness in an explanatory/predictive theory of cognition and behavior (Kim 2005, 10-11).

In this essay, I offer a diagnosis of some of the reasons why some contemporary philosophers have been so ambivalent about consciousness. I argue that such an ambivalence is misguided. In a sense, I seek to extend what Kim himself identifies as the

problem with sequestering or ignoring consciousness. Kim notes the odd juxtaposition of those who denigrate consciousness with those philosophers who work on ethics and value theory:

Contrast this lowly status of consciousness in science and metaphysics with its lofty standing in moral philosophy and value theory. When philosophers discuss the nature of the intrinsic good, or what is worthy of our debate and volition for its own sake, the most profoundly mentioned candidates are things like pleasure, absence of pain, enjoyment, and happiness... To most of us, a fulfilling life, a life worth living, is one that is rich and full in qualitative consciousness. We would regard life as impoverished and not fully satisfying if it never included experiences of things like the smell of the sea in a cold morning breeze, the lambent play of sunlight on brilliant autumn foliage, the fragrance of a field of lavender in bloom, and the vibrant, layered soundscape projected by a string quartet... (Kim 2005, 11)

In this essay I expand Kim's list of what we value, and argue that such values (including the value of the natural sciences themselves) are in profound tension with the project of marginalizing consciousness. The existence of consciousness is, I propose, a prerequisite for the practice of science and the study of science and religion.

#### THE PRIMACY OF THE MIND-INDEPENDENT PHYSICAL WORLD

Today, a form of naturalism that enjoys widespread approval is one that takes the nature and existence of a mind-independent world to be clear and problem-free. We know of the material world with the awesome tools of the natural science, with our only chief philosophically-relevant task being to show how what we think of the mind is explainable in the same terms employed in our explanations of non-mental phenomena. Here is an often cited, almost (now) classic statement of a current form of physicalism:

There is only sort of stuff, namely matter –the physical stuff of physics, chemistry, physiology –and the mind is somehow noting but a physical phenomenon. In short, the mind is the brain... we can (in principle) account for every mental phenomenon using the same physical principles, laws, and raw materials that suffice to explain radioactivity, continental drift, photosynthesis, reproduction, nutrition and growth. (Dennett 1991, 33)

This passage by Dennett is extended in his more recent book, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds*:

We know how atoms are structured, how chemical elements interact, how plants and animals propagate, how microscopic pathogens thrive and spread, how continents drift, how hurricanes are born, and much, much more. We know our brains are made of the

same ingredients as all the other things we've explained, and we know that we belong to an evolved lineage that can be traced back to the dawn of life. If we can explain self-repair in bacteria and respiration in tadpoles and digestion in elephants, why shouldn't conscious thinking in *H. sapiens*, eventually divulge its secret workings to the same ever improving, self-enhancing juggernaut? (Dennett 2017, 23)

The idea that the mind would not be found to be identical with the brain, the body or its part(s), is frequently thought to be preposterous. While Kim is not enamored by eliminative approaches to the mental, he is no fan of mind-body dualism:

It simply does not seem credible that an immaterial substance with no material characteristics and totally outside physical space, could causally influence and be influenced by, the motions of material bodies that are strictly governed by physical law. Just try to imagine how something that isn't anywhere in physical space could alter in the slightest degree the trajectory of even a single material particle in motion. (Kim 1996, 4)

Eliot Sober uses similar terminology to set the stage for thinking (or not thinking) of the mind.

If the mind is immaterial, then it does not take up space. But if it lacks spatial location, how can it be causally connected to the body? When two events are causally connected, we normally expect there to be a physical signal that passes from one to the other. How can a physical signal emerge from or lead to the mind if the mind is no place at all? (Sober 2000, 24)

I suggest that the above claims rest on a philosophical mistake, the mistake of thinking that we have a clearer idea of what is physical than we have of what is mental or mindful.

#### THE PRIMACY OF THE MENTAL

First, note that Dennett's statement of materialism would not be intelligible unless we have a grasp of the ideas, concepts, theories, and the mental skills involved. Minimally, we would need to grasp what is involved in the sciences. We cannot have science without scientists. Physics, chemistry, and biology are unintelligible unless we understand and employ scientific practices using reason, observation, evidence, explanations, even the concepts of "the mind," "the brain," "physical principles," "laws," "raw materials," the idea of "radioactivity," "continental drift," and so on. Our appealing to some physical explanation of something cannot be any clearer than the concepts, claims, the theories of explanation employed. It is unlikely we would have any way of

even understanding what is an institute or community of scientists working on any of the domains Dennett references without relying on there being persons, intercommunication and reflection; we would need to have some robust understanding of scientists who are persons, commute to work, have lives, and so on. Even to claim that persons (or scientists) are zombies, behavioral creatures without consciousness, we would need to rely on our employing concepts such as “persons,” “scientists,” “behavior,” and so on. We would also need to understand what is a philosophical argument, to understand how to appeal to reason and logic.

On the face of it, we have every reason to think that the evident reality of what is mental is prior to any reasonable views we might have of the world that is mind-independent. The priority here is conceptual and epistemic, as opposed to ontological (which may be an open question). Giving consciousness and the mental anything like secondary status courts absurdity, especially in the case of a highly conscious, mental practice such as science. As Stan Klein observes: “According subjectivity ‘second class citizenship’ in the study of mind is particularly ironic in virtue of the fact that subjectivity is the very thing that makes the scientific pursuit of such knowledge (actually any knowledge) possible. Timing devices, neuroimaging technologies, electroencephalographs, and a host of modern means of obtaining objective knowledge about mind are useless absent an experiencing subject” (Klein 2015, 42).

As for Dennett’s claims that the mind or brain should be explained by the same principles employed in the examples he cites, this is deeply problematic. None of the cases he cites involve the employment of reason, desire, sensations, observations, and so on. I suggest what he is doing is relying heavily on the natural sciences as they have been historically shaped by excluding the mental. None of the laws of motion discovered by Newton, for example, contain any reference to an occasion when two bodies (say two persons) might be attracted to each other (perhaps moving toward each other) on the grounds of beliefs and desires (say, love). For us to assume at the outset that we should privilege explaining the mental in terms of what is not mental seems to get matters in reverse order, for the explanations of how microscopic pathogens thrive and spread, how hurricanes are born, and so on, would not be possible unless we have command of considerable, reliable, mental processes involved. I consider explicitly below / shortly the extreme claim that Dennett makes that consciousness is an illusion (not something real),

but at the very outset I suggest that if we can explain self-repair in bacteria and respiration in tadpoles and digestion in elephants, and so on, this seems to count as excellent, at least prima facie evidence for the existence, functionality and reliability of consciousness. *The success, past and future, of the natural sciences would not be possible without there being conscious, thinking, reasoning scientists.* As Gallagher and Zahavi point out, “Science is performed by somebody, it is a specific theoretical stance toward the world... scientific objectivity is something we strive for but it rests on the observations of individuals” (Callagher and Zahavi 2012, 47).

As for Kim’s and Sober’s remarks, I suggest that we currently lack a clear understanding of what is material or physical, and thus a clear understanding of “strict physical laws.” They seem to assume that that which is mental (on a dualist schema, anyway) must be non-spatial, and that which is spatial must be physical. A range of philosophers have proposed that there are spatial, (non-physical) mental objects such as visual images (G.E. Moore, H.H. Price), and the Cambridge Platonists (the first thinkers to practice philosophy in the English language, 17th century) claimed that a person’s embodiment consists of a person’s affective identification with their physical bodies. The idea is that your healthy embodiment consists (in part) in your proprioceptive awareness of your body and its spatial location. The way Dennett, Kim, and Sober set up the materialist agenda we are supposed to have solid firm concepts of signals, the motion of single or collective material particles in motion, and causal powers, whereas all of these notions involve notions, the concept of movement, change, the idea of causation and explanation, and without prior confidence in these mental phenomena, we cannot get the materialist agenda off the ground. (Interestingly, it may be added that Kim’s claims also seem to commit him to believe that our imagination can be an important tool in our coming to conclusions about the nature of reality. This is giving mental phenomenon some prestige).

Dennett embraces Wilfred Sellars’ famous distinction between the manifest image and the scientific image. The later is shorn of the mental whereas the manifest image is the world of appearances. He writes:

Even scientists conduct most of their waking lives conceiving of what is going on in terms of the manifest image. (“Pass the pencil, please” is a typical bit of communication that depends on the manifest image, with its people and their needs and desires, their

abilities to hear, see, understand, and act; the characteristic of identifying marks of pencils, their size and weight, their use; and a host of other things. (Dennett 2017, 58)

These denizens are not, by Dennett's lights, to be part of the final ontology, his account of what exists. The existence of the mental and persons are "not *mere* fictions but different versions of what actually exists: real patterns," but those real patterns turn out to be what is revealed in the scientific image –physics, chemistry, biology, neurophysiology in which there is no mental, conscious life. But note the Pickwickian way Dennett sets up his concession to what he refers to the illusion of consciousness. Arguably, for scientists to function as scientists not only need they assume there are persons (and so on) when they want a pencil or are awake, but their functioning as scientists would (I propose) be impossible without assuming the truth of there being persons, and so on for the various denizens of the manifest image. Without assuming (what Dennett claims is) an illusion is not a mere illusion, there would be no science.

Let us step back a little and look at Dennett's strategy. Dennett's most recent book is designed to cast (what I am regarding as primary) the use of reason, the apparent existence of consciousness as something latent in human evolution, an illusion created by non-mental physical causes. According to Dennett, much of what we do (from breathing to digesting food, to seeking to reproduce) is not prompted or led by what we understand to be the case. In a phrase, we as biologically evolved organisms have competence without comprehension. Dennett seems right that, for example, bacteria may be described as competent in surviving without comprehension, and it may be that significant behavior and activity of ours such as digesting food, and so on, are not matters of deliberate, cognitive understanding and reasoning. From Dennett's point of view, there can be reasons we do things, but at least some of these are not reasons we grasp or are consciously aware of as causing or motivating us to do what we do. He likens our activity along the lines of user-illusions such as those we use on computers. We competently act with our computers to create files, to drag and delete items and so on without (for many of us non-experts) any awareness of the technology that makes this possible or is involved in the activity. Similarly, we are not directly aware of the neurological processes that are actually causally accountable for bringing about our behavior. Our action with our computers are akin to the "user-illusion brilliantly designed by evolution to fit the needs of its users." (Dennett 2017, 180)

In reply, I suggest this radically marginalizes the very nature of our lives and action. It has been widely recognized in philosophy, going back at least to Plato and Aristotle, that some bodily activity is not deliberated and reflectively willed. When we do consider deliberate, self-aware acts, however, there simply cannot be the agnosticism or ignorance of why we act the way we do. Take rudimentary acts like deliberately talking to someone about anything of any kind, say a recent battle. For there to be such talk there must be an at least implicit awareness that the persons are talking, and that both grasp the nature of battles, strategy, violence, and so on. That they are talking as opposed to being silent. The analogy Dennett employs is designed to undermine our confidence in our acting in reason-based ways. But when you want to move an object on your computer screen to the right, aren't you aware of your wanting to move the object to your right? This fundamental self-awareness of what we do should not be overshadowed by Dennett's ill-formed analogy. (His analogy would lead us to think it is an illusion that we drive cars when such driving involves engines and mechanics many of us do not understand.)

Moreover, I suggest the whole of Dennett's book, *The Evolution of Minds*, stands as counter-evidence to his thesis. He presents us reasoned arguments for why we should accept his conclusions. This practice seems unintelligible unless there is what may be called mental causation. By mental causation, I refer to when it is that some event (say, a person answering a mathematical question) is based on the subject's grasp of the reasons why the answer is correct. So, when asked "What is the smallest perfect number?" The reason why persons reply "6" is because they grasp the 6 is the smallest number equal to its divisors, including one, but not itself ( $1+2+3=6$ ). If this is a reliable way of depicting the way we reason and why, then the mental world cannot be an illusion. Analogies with computers that "reason" without being conscious is suspect both because the idea that computers can reason is suspect (on this point, I side with Searle contra mundum) and that even if they can, this does not undermine the reality of our reasoning in ways that ineliminably involves beliefs and conscious deliberation.

The primacy of the mental is further advanced when taking into account efforts like Dennett's to make first-person awareness subordinate to or at least no more significant than we have of first person awareness. In *The Evolution of Minds*, Dennett depicts someone who takes the first-person seriously as a fearful, narcissistic person. Here is his depiction of someone who believes we are certain we are conscious subjects, in

which he offers them the complement of them not being motivated by obvious idle fantasies:

It's tempting to diagnose those who disagree [with Dennett's case against the reality of consciousness] –as suffering from one or another ignominious failing: narcissism (“I refuse to have my glorious mind captured in the snares of science!”); fear (“If my mind is just my brain, I won't be in charge; life will have no meaning!”); or disdain (“These simple-minded, scientific reductionists! They have no idea how far short they fall in their puny attempts to appreciate the world of meaning!”). These diagnoses are often warranted. There is no shortage of pathetic bleats issuing from the mouths of the Defenders, but the concerns that motivate them are not idle fantasies (Dennett 2017, 23)

Of course it is strange that someone like Dennett might claim that persons can truly be narcissists or have fear or believe they are in control of anything when all these only make sense in what he calls the manifest image, and are not taking place in terms of what really exists (that which is revealed in the scientific image) as part of his final ontology. But quite apart from that, it is hard to understand how Dennett can even make sense of his thesis that the first-person point of view is on the same plane as a third-person point of view. To see the problem, consider this passage:

The third-person methodology, dubbed heterophenomenology (phenomenology of another not oneself), is, I have claimed, the sound way to take the first-person point of view as seriously as it can be taken... Most the method is so obvious and inconsequential that some scientists are fabled that I would even call it a method: basically you have to take the vocal sounds emanating from the subjects' mouths (and your own mouth) and interpret them! Well of course. What else could you do? Those sounds aren't just belches and moans: they're speech acts, reporting, questioning, correcting requiring, and so forth. Using such standard speech acts, other events such as button-presses can be set up to be interpreted as speech acts as well, and highly specific meanings and fine-tuned temporal resolution... (Dennett 2003, 1-2)

(As an aside: Note the parallel in the above text and the one cited earlier when Dennett refers to noises or words coming from the mouths of people.)

The problem with the case of persons identifying noises coming from persons (presumably one's own mouth) is that one would have no way of identifying whose mouth is whose without self-awareness, without a person knowing in his or her own person that she is speaking (or thinking or observing). How can a scientist instruct anyone (or set about himself) studying what “noises that person is making” without knowing what “that” refers to? When we use indexicals like “this” and “that,” their meaning is comprised of

identifying something that the speaker (a person or subject) is drawing attention to. No one would know what person or what noise to study without having an antecedent self-awareness of who one is. No third-person description of a laboratory or conference center will reveal a very important fact: which person is you.

More to the core of our common conception of ourselves: When I am in pain, I do not have to look in the mirror or listen to myself screaming. I know this (in most, but not all cases) immediately as the one who suffers. Elsewhere in his writing, Dennett seems to have little doubt about the first-person awareness of feelings or his ability to know about the feelings of others. In *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett recounts an incident in which he is well aware of the pain experienced by his daughter and his seeking to relieve that pain through his sympathetic bearing of the pain (not by way of telling her daughter that the pain is only a part of the manifest image).

Many years ago, my five-year old daughter... tipped over the piano stool and painfully crushed two of her fingertips. How was I going to calm down this terrified child so I could safely drive her to the emergency room? Inspiration struck: I held my own hand near her throbbing little hand and sternly ordered: 'Look, Andrea! I'm going to teach you a secret! You can push the pain into my pain with your mind. Go ahead, push! Push! She tried – and it worked! She'd 'pushed the pain' into Daddy's hand. Her relief (and fascination) was instantaneous. The effect lasted only for minutes, but a few further administrations of impromptu hypnotic analgesia along the way, I got her to the emergency room, where they could give her the further treatment that she needed. (Dennett 2006, 135)

As an ad hominem point, I do not suggest that the above testimony reveals that Dennett is inconsistent. He would probably simply note that such a story is told within the manifest image. My point, instead, is that not only such stories are in the so-called manifest image, but that it is very difficult to deny that the phenomena themselves are real, not illusion.

To summarize this section, I have defended the first person point of view and the reality of consciousness as a prerequisite for science as well as something quite evident in experience. I have not defended dualism, but I have argued that eliminativism is implausible. I have defended dualism elsewhere but note that some non-dualist accounts of mind could be employed in opposing Dennett, such as hylomorphism.

I now turn to explore how the recognition of consciousness might impact our study of religion.

## CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

I suggest that some recognition of the reality of consciousness as not being eliminated by science (or a scientifically oriented philosophy) would go some way to counter the ways theism has been dismissed by some contemporary sources. Consider just two: one is by Wesley Wildman and the second is by Herman Philipse. This section is briefer than part one.

In *Religious and Spiritual Experiences*, Wesley Wildman describes reported experiential revelation as conceptually impaired. According to Wildman, the experiential encounter with God in theistic tradition is the encounter with “disembodied intentionality” (Wildman 2011, 40). God is thus like angels and ghosts who are “discarnate intentional beings.” In rejecting theism, naturalists hold that there are “no disembodied forms of intentionality, no disembodied powers.”

I suggest that this terminology betrays an assumption that theism involves an impaired, unnatural, perhaps even damaged view of intentionality. “Disembodied” and “discarnate” suggests that a divine intentional force or being is lacking something that would otherwise ground it or give it a proper foundation. It is better, or less misleading in my view, to describe the ostensible experience of the God of Abrahamic faith as an encounter with a transcendent, holy, knowing, powerful subject; God would be seen as transcendent of the physical world (insofar as God is not numerically identical with one or more material bodies) but not as thereby “disembodied.”

Phlipse offers the following critique of theism from the standpoint of how we have a meaningful, materially based understanding of human agency but no idea about how such agency would be coherent in the context of the non-physical. I suggest that this critique has force insofar as we dismiss consciousness as a free-standing, primary philosophical reference point (entirely subject to behavioral conditions).

How can one meaningfully say that God listens to our prayers, loves us, speaks to us, answers (or does not answer our supplications, etcetera), if God is also assumed to be an incorporeal being? For the stipulation that God is an incorporeal being annuls the very conditions for meaningfully applying psychological expressions to another entity, to wit, that this entity is able in principle to display forms of bodily behavior which resemble patterns of human behavior. In other words, the very attempt to give a meaning and a

possible referent to the word ‘God’ as used in theism must fail, because this attempt is incoherent. (Philipse 2012, 101-102).

In this critique, Philipse, seems to assume some form of behaviorism, requiring a God who hears and responds to prayers to act in ways that are similar to the way we humans listen and respond to one another. But even in our case, behaviorism seems suspect. If we listen to others, love, speak, and answer questions, this is plausibly regarded as involving behavior only because of antecedent conscious intentions that become displayed in behavior. The behavior itself is not, however, the self-same thing as the conscious phenomena. We can imagine the all the behavior that we associate with listening, loving, and so on, but without the conscious intentions (imagine a case of deception or a profound dysfunction). As for whether all and only objects can be identified and differentiated if they are physical, this is a dramatic, sweeping thesis that would require considerable argument. Arguably, we can distinguish between ideas, abstract objects, characters in stories, and so on without these objects have material, circumscribable locations.

Much more can be said on such matters. I offer you these observations to stimulate discussion on how the recognition of consciousness can make an important difference in our philosophy of science and religion. In other work, such as the book *Consciousness and the Mind of God*, I seek to show how the recognition of human subjects and experience make more sense in a theistic universe than one that is naturalistic.

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