Non-Reductive Theories of Consciousness and Phenomenology

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1. Introduction

In the growing wave of interest in consciousness in the analytic philosophy of mind, there has been an interesting movement of non-reductive theories of consciousness over the last three decades. It moves against the mainstream of the reductive analytic philosophy of consciousness and its central exponents are Thomas Nagel, John Searle and David Chalmers. Reductive theories hold that conscious phenomena can be completely explained in physical terms whereas non-reductive theories deny such a possibility. What is the nature of conscious phenomena in the light of the non-reductive theories? This question may be answered in at least three ways. First, one can describe these theories against their closest negative background, that is against the reductive theories of consciousness. Second, there are some interesting differences and tensions within the non-reductive group of theories and some of them are worth exploring in themselves. Third, the non-reductive theories can be compared with twentieth century phenomenology for there has been no more elaborated and detailed analysis of consciousness in the philosophical tradition than that offered by phenomenology.

Both phenomenological and non-reductive theories share some fundamental assumption at their starting points: they share the idea that what matters in the nature of mind is consciousness and that consciousness cannot be explained in terms of something more elementary. A closer examination of the relation between them gives some hopes for a better insight into the assumptions underlying them and perhaps into the nature of consciousness itself. But this comparison requires the scope of a book and here I can only outline it. In what follows I shall attempt to compare the two kinds of theories in respect of the scope of the described phenomena, the ways of the conceptualization of conscious phenomena and their relation to the physical phenomena. The most difficult and demanding of them is the comparison of the conceptualizations and this is what I will focus attention on.

2. The Ways of Conceptualization

The analytic approach is, perhaps unexpectedly, broader than the phenomenological approach with respect to the scope of the phenomena taken into account. One of the underlying assumptions of the phenomenological theories is that they consider conscious phenomena as appearing in the human mind only. In contrast to that, analytic theories consider these phenomena as appearing also in the minds of many other higher species. Besides, Thomas Nagel almost explicitly holds that there are many other intelligent creatures in the universe, who of course have also conscious minds. Given the myriad of species living on earth alone, it extends remarkably the scope of the examined phenomena.

The difference in the scope can partly explain the differences in the central features of the conceptualization of conscious phenomena between the theories in question. While the most important feature of consciousness in phenomenology is intentionality, in analytic theories it is 'subjectivity'. Does this constitute a fundamental difference? What is the relation between intentionality and 'subjectivity'? The idea of 'subjectivity' as the central feature of consciousness was first introduced by Nagel in his "classic" essay "What is it like to be a bat?" and has been championed since then by him as well as by Searle and Chalmers (Nagel 1974). In order to approach what Nagel means by 'subjectivity' one has to keep in mind its negative background. Nagel has introduced it in opposition to the situation on the stage of the analytic philosophy of mind set at that time among others by: Smart, Putnam, Armstrong and Dennett. Nagel did not argue that materialist theories of mind were wrong as such, he did argue, however, that they went wrong in ignoring consciousness from the very beginning. It is consciousness that matters most in the understanding of the nature of the mind and it cannot be explained in physical terms. Also, it is unjustified to use uncritically the distinction between primary and secondary qualities to explain the relation between the physical and the mental. It is impossible to give a strict definition of 'subjectivity', as it is impossible to give the definition of consciousness. In his famous formulation Nagel says that "an organism has conscious experience *at all* means basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism" (Nagel 1974). 'Subjectivity' means that mental states are given 'from a particular point of view' or from the 'internal point of view'. 'Point of view' along with the wide range of conscious experience are at the heart of Nagel's idea of the mind. It is precisely for this reason that minds cannot be grasped by physical methods but they are part of reality as well.

Any analytic theory of consciousness formulated after Wittgenstein has to challenge his famous position given in the argument of private language. Nagel recognizes Wittgenstein as the most important thinker of the XX century, recognizes that the rules of language must be public but he denies that mental states are strictly private. Wittgenstein made a false objectification of mental phenomena, in which he ignored their essential connection with 'a point of view' and regarded them as if they had been private physical objects. In spite of their different nature mental phenomena are also in a way objective: "I assume that the subjective ideas of experience, of action, and of the self are in some sense public or common property. That is why the problems of mind and body, free will, and personal identity are not just problems about one's own case." (Nagel 1979, 207). We do use mental terms both in the first and in the third person and what we have in mind doing so is not the behavioral aspects of their meanings alone.

John Searle's position is similar to that of Nagel's. In *The Rediscovery of the Mind* he discusses seven types of materialist theories of the mind showing that all of them have one error in common: they overlook or ignore that the mind is the conscious mind (Searle 1992). Searle's conceptualization of mental phenomena is more extensive than Nagel's. He distinguishes twelve 'structural features' of them, mentions two additional, and highlights two of them: 'subjectivity' ('subjective feeling') and intentionality. He describes 'subjectivity' in a way similar to that of Nagel and uses the concept of 'ontological subjectivity' instead of 'a particular point of view'. What is interesting in Searle's views on intentionality is its evolution towards the position of phenomenology. In his earlier work he examined the

'logic of intentionality' without referring to consciousness (Searle 1983). Now he distinguishes different forms of intentionality and claims that the 'internal intentionality of consciousness' is more elementary than that of language. But there are apparently some points in Searle's conceptualization at which the tension between phenomenological and linguistic concepts of the mind comes to surface. They are closely related to one of 'the structural features' of consciousness that is 'the aspect of familiarity'. First, this property involves categorization and it is not absolutely clear whether the categories are secondary and reflect the meanings that are present in consciousness (as they do within the framework of the phenomenological theory) or whether they are primary and are needed for the interpretation of conscious experience. Second, 'the aspect of familiarity' depends on the whole 'network of intentionality' and the latter can only function due to 'the capacities of the Background'. It is precisely at this point that the philosophy of later Wittgenstein enters into Searle's theory and he regards this philosophy as mainly concerned with the problems of 'the Background'. Among other things, 'the Background' contains contingent human practices. In the phenomenological theory of mind the meanings are grounded in the *a priori* order of 'the essences' of phenomena and 'the transcendental' sphere of subject, whereas in Searle's theory they are finally (at least partly) grounded in some contingent human practices. Some of the other differences are these: while in Searle's theory the meanings represent the world, in phenomenological theory both individual phenomena and their 'essences' present themselves directly. Both theories recognize the organizational structure of consciousness but in the phenomenological theory its central basis is the *a priori* correlation between the acts of consciousness and the realm of 'essences'. There are no more major disagreements between the rest of Searle's 'features' and phenomenological description of consciousness but, of course, both terminology and the placement of emphasis are different.

David Chalmers' approach to the problems of the mind is more empirical than that of Nagel's and Searle's but he also argues that what is most interesting and most 'mysterious' about the mind is consciousness. The problem is that some neural processes in the brain are accompanied by 'the subjective aspect' of conscious experience. Even if we identified them exactly we would not understand automatically by this why they take place at all. To understand this would mean to resolve 'the hard problem' of consciousness. In his own attempt to describe 'the subjective aspect' of consciousness, Chalmers refers to Nagel's famous phrase (Chalmers 1996).

We can now return to the questions asked at the beginning of this section. What can we say about 'subjectivity' from the perspective of phenomenological theory? 'Subjectivity' is a more general feature because it refers to both intentional and non-intentional forms of consciousness. But it is easier to discuss the qualitative differences of conscious phenomena in terms of the differences of their intentional objects. 'A *qualitative feel*' of consciousness has never appealed to the researchers of the phenomenological tradition because their central interest has been different. But it must be there because their conceptualizations always involve 'the transcendental' subject, and both intentional and non-intentional forms of consciousness are 'subjective' in this sense.

3. Towards the Subject of Consciousness

The problem of the subject of consciousness seems to be the most interesting and difficult at the same time. There are two well-known distinctions within the phenomenological theory: one between 'the transcendental ego' and the stream of consciousness and the other between the acts of consciousness and the objects towards which they are directed. Our concern here is with the former and Nagel's idea of the 'particular point of view' and the range of experiences related with it can be regarded as a more general but parallel idea. This idea is extended remarkably on the subjective side in *The View from Nowhere* devoted mainly to the nature of the human mind (Nagel 1986).

Nagel approaches the problems of the self from a few different perspectives. Within the context of personal identity, he argues that there must be 'a self as continuing subject of consciousness' and its nature cannot be explained either in terms of a substance (immaterial or material) or in terms of psychological continuity of any kind. Its nature cannot be reduced to the role of the grammatical or logical subject either. But Nagel's most original contribution to the philosophy of the self is this. What is unique for the human mind is its capacity to transcend its own subjective conditions and to develop the objective conception of the world. It is free of any particular point of view and in this sense it is 'the view from nowhere'. Still, we cannot escape our particular position within the world and because of this we are condemned to 'double vision" of the subjective and objective point of view. Although there are tensions and conflicts between them, both perspectives are valid and important. But even the most abstract objective conception of reality has to have its subject: something must be left over on the 'other side of the lenses'. The 'Objective self' is the logical subject of the objective conception of the world and it is an important aspect of the human mind. Nagel himself observes that 'the objective self' is related to Husserl's 'transcendental ego' or Wittgenstein's 'logical subject' from the *Tractatus.* For Husserl 'transcendental ego' is the ultimate source of meanings whereas Nagel's 'objective self' is the logical subject of the objective conception of reality. While 'transcendental ego' is always outside the world, Nagel attempts to place 'the objective self' within the objective conception of reality in order to close it. But this move is never completely successful. Despite these differences, the substantial role of the subject of consciousness is clear in both theories.

It is surprising that the subject of consciousness does not emerge in *The Rediscovery of the Mind.* Although Searle recognizes that there is 'a feeling of myself' or 'a characteristic sense of our own personhood' he does not put any weight on it (Searle 1992 134, 252). But again, there is an interesting evolution of Searle's ideas. In *Rationality in Action*, his last book, he argues that there must be 'an irreducible non-Humean self' as the condition for rational action (Searle 2001, 79-96). In this way 'with the greatest reluctance' he abandons the neo-Humean concept of the mind. But the subject of action is also the subject of consciousness and the question arises as to whether Searle's new position does not imply a need of some supplement to his earlier position. If he introduced such a supplement, his position would be closer to that of both Nagel and phenomenology. We may hope for such a revision as Searle's search is always in progress and knows no resting-place.

The ontological foundations of conscious experience never emerge directly ('is given') on the level of consciousness. For this reason the mind-body problem has never been a part of any phenomenological project. Of course it has come to surface many times, for example, taking the form of idealism in the case of Husserl. In contrast to that, the question about the relation between mental and non-mental phenomena is standard in the analytic philosophy of consciousness. This is the point at which the differences inside the analytic camp become more than interesting. While in Searle's 'biological naturalism' nothing is surprising in the mind-body relation, in Nagel's 'double aspect' stance there always will be some mystery in this relation.

Literature

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