

Intriguing question on scientific theory on consciousness - how can we tackle the problem at all?

<http://www.starmind.com/question/1241/>

Zusammenfassung: Although you have received many solutions to this question, I believe mine will be of great value to you, even if you have now finished writing the paper. I resolve the apparent contradictions involved with internal dialogue using an original philosophical linguistic approach, which I believe serves to clarify what is going on immensely. I then present some more general ideas remarks upon the phenomena of the subjective conscious experience more generally, referring to the ideas of Daniel C. Dennet and the serial projection theory of consciousness. I hope you enjoy reading the solution as much as I enjoyed researching and writing it. DB

I wish to resolve this apparent paradox with a combination of philosophy and linguistics; in a way similar to the methods employed by Ludwig Wittgenstein. I think this approach is both more effective and satisfying than a discussion of the various parts of the psyche and their various interactions. The problem is that we sometimes catch ourselves 'talking to ourselves'- yet it does not seem like we are two people (or intellects) that are capable of conversing between each other.

Firstly, I would like to compare the problem with a similar situation. Imagine for a moment a man (the defendant) giving evidence in court. He stands accused of some crime, for which he is presenting an alibi. Suppose first he is guilty: then when he presents his (false) alibi, we say he is claiming one thing whilst knowing that another is the case. Put another way, he is saying one thing externally, and another thing internally, so that it has appeared he has fractured in two. Interestingly, if he was innocent, and he spoke truthfully about his alibi, we would find it strange if someone relayed to us that he said this alibi both internally and externally: the two are not distinguishable in the same way in this case. It seems like in the former case he is two people, and in the latter only one.

Suppose now that you are given a card, and on the card is written the sentence 'the small, brown fox jumped over the lazy dog'. Consider the significance of each of the following actions:

-You read the sentence aloud to a friend, perhaps seeing the card for the first time, carefully thinking about the meaning of each word (in isolation) as you read it

-You read the sentence aloud to a friend, at the same time having a picture of the event it describes in your mind's eye (either a static picture or a moving one of the jump actually taking place)

-You read the sentence aloud to your friend, but concentrate your mind on something else (i.e. read it 'without meaning it')

-Saying the sentence to a friend as if reading it by heart (from memory), but incidentally looking at each word as it is said

Consider also the case in which you perform each of these actions but with no friend present: perhaps you mistakenly believe he was there when he was not. (We can also analyse the various possible reactions from the point of view of the friend.)

It is of interest to contemplate precisely what it was you made an effort to do differently in each case. Unless your friend is a talented intuitive psychologist, he may not know which (if any) of the listed actions you have performed upon hearing the words. In any case, you could take steps to conceal this information from him.

Now, think of trying to say the sentence 'To' your friend- directing it at him, as it were. How would you go about saying the sentence To him, as opposed to just saying it? Would you picture him in your mind's eye as you said it? You might wish to look directly at him and make eye contact- but then, you are constrained to look at the piece of card with the sentence on. Perhaps you would think of inducing a reaction from him? This seems likely- you could fixate on his reaction upon hearing the words. You aim for him to understand their meaning; to invoke a similar picture in his head to the one you imagined when you said the sentence 'with feeling'. If your friend was actually absent when you said it to him in this manner then your manifest actions would be the same but their significance conversationally speaking

would not be. If you believed he was there you might feel you had succeeded in saying it To him, even if he was absent.

Once we understand what it means to say something To someone, as opposed to just saying it, we are in a better position to understand what happens when we language our thoughts internally. It should be clear that when we reason with ourselves, we are not aiming to convey information between different parts of our psyche- that is to say, no information is communicated as such. Moreover, all of the features that characterise saying the sentence To someone (as opposed to just saying it) are absent. We aim to invoke no specific reaction, and do not imagine what that action might be. We certainly do not picture a receptive part of ourselves, distinct from this perceiver, to whom we are communicating.

Now, if we try to categorise the way in which we speak to ourselves, we will find that what can sometimes happen will be of an entirely different nature to what happens when we read aloud the words written upon the piece of card. A crucial difference is that when reading from the card (especially for the first time) the logical meaning of the utterance is something determined in advance. Conversely, many times when we say our thoughts to ourselves, and especially when we are engaged in reasoning or deliberation, the completed thought does not exist prior to languaging it. The actual words themselves are a vehicle for the meaning of the thought, rather than being something like a place-marker which accompanies its meaning. I would go so far as to say that collocations (words which go together in a certain sequence with a higher frequency than their independent frequency and grammar would dictate) influence the direction in which incomplete thoughts go, simply by presenting as natural choices for the completion of the sentences which phrase them.

Now consider the case where 'You read the sentence aloud to your friend, but concentrate your mind on something else (i.e. read it 'without meaning it')'. Does this have an equivalent in purely internal discourse? In the case with the card, reading is a physical reaction to an external stimulus that we can attempt to direct our conscious attention away from. However, if there is no stimulus present, and we are to decide which word to internally say to ourselves, then by definition we cannot help but think of this word. We may try to think of the word purely formally without thinking about it's meaning, but this seems difficult and unnatural, unless we generate it by some mathematical process. Don't think of an elephant! The case where we unconsciously read internally a word on a card presented to us can be equated with the scenario of simply reading it out loud unconsciously from the card but with us also suppressing the physical sound-generating mechanism (we may feel inclined to silently move our mouths as if we were talking).

I think we can now split the problem into two cases. The first case is where our thoughts have yet to be completed, and take on a form through language; a conduit to meaning in themselves. Here they are not said as directed To anyone in the usual sense, being as they are still evolving. The other case, where we

rehearse a completed sentence internally, may be equated to simply reading out loud but with suppression of the vocal mechanism. If we were to internally say a rehearsed sentence unconsciously, but then 'hear' it consciously and derive new meaning from it, then this should not come as a surprise. We should treat it just the same as if rather than hearing the words internally they had emanate from a source external to us. By definition, their meaning does come externally from our consciousness if we do not know it yet. When we first say the words we do not yet say them 'with feeling', contemplating their underlying meaning, but are merely 'going through the motions' of this action. Perhaps merely saying the words can internally conjure up mental images that combine more effectively to elucidate the underlying meaning. Or perhaps it just serves to better focus our minds upon the sentence, or even evokes some physiological reaction to do with a set of motions induced in our larynx or lips. At any rate it is clear that we are not two people in conversation in the sense that we would usually understand it. We are sometimes listening, sometimes hearing, and occasionally we are some combination of the two.

As regards the phenomena of consciousness generally, I would like to present (for your interest) a solution to a Starmind problem I had solved previously. I hope you enjoy it, even if you do not learn anything new.

"For much of what follows, I must give credit to the philosopher Daniel C. Dennet. Some of these ideas may be expanded upon in this book entitled 'consciousness explained', although I have yet to read it myself, and there seems to be little reference to it in the wikipedia article pertaining to Dennet's work on the subject:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consciousness_Explained

I will attempt to shed some light on our subjective subconscious experience, and hint at possible evolutionary explanations for its development. First it is important to have a clear distinction between serial and parallel processes. This idea will be familiar from elementary lessons in electrical circuits, where the outputs of light-bulbs are compared when they are wired in series and in parallel. We can apply this distinction to the way in which certain processes are carried out by computers and by human and (other) animal brains. It is also important to distinguish between genuine parallel function, and processes that appear to be parallel but are really serial processes that switch rapidly between different tasks. For example, most of the time when humans 'multitask' they are essentially switching between different activities, but only focusing on one at a time. As with the lightbulbs, it is often the case that tackling a task in a parallel manner is more efficient than tackling it serially.

Computers are vastly more efficient than us at performing serial tasks. They can 'crunch numbers' at

incredibly fast speeds with very little difficulty. Humans generally struggle with performing simple tasks such as long multiplication because they are limited by the firing speeds of the neurons in their brains, which require a much longer recovery time. However, between these neurons are trillions of connections, and the human brain is incredibly adept at performing complex tasks (which are really many times more complicated than arithmetic) using the neurons in parallel. It is for this reason that humans are so good at spotting complex patterns that would elude a machine, as well as predicting the social behaviour of other individuals, and so on. It is also easy to see why parallel-wired brains should evolve, as the kind of tasks they are good at tend to coincide with the necessities of survival in the world. It is only recently that attempts have been made to harness the power of parallel functioning in computers: in the last few years, work has been done on a supercomputer with a primitive version of parallel technology, although I think it is really no more than some laptop-sized computers linked together with a CPU in charge of task allocation between the auxiliary units.

Now, one of the most immediate characteristics of our immediate conscious experience is that it is fundamentally serial in nature- like an internal soliloquy. Whereas other parts of our subconscious assimilate masses of information automatically and at the same time, consciousness is fundamentally serial. It is Professor Dennet's contention that the phenomenon of consciousness is the projection of the parallel functioning of the brain into a serial form. However, it has not as of yet been made clear as to why this should be an advantage, but I myself have some speculations, which I would like to present.

Whereas in the social and animal realm parallel functioning is superior, it is a characteristic of more serious and Academic discourse that it is capable of being communicated serially. This is most marked in the case of written discourse. The medium of television functions in parallel, stimulating more than one sense at the same time (visual and audio stimulation are added to the discourse), but it seems that the written word is more effective for communicating a complex subject. Similarly, as man evolved culturally and intellectually, a serial interpretation of his thoughts for means of direct communication would net him a substantial genetic evolutionary advantage. It is interesting to note that the predictions of academic psychology are sometimes inferior to the intuition of a 'socially savvy' individual, but in subjects such as physics and advanced mathematics (analysis in particular), it is impossible to progress in this intuitive manner, and serial communication is needed.

I think another evolutionary advantage to having a serial consciousness is the ability to conduct an internal trial in order to judge the efficacy of some potential future action. If a neanderthal had an important decision to make it might be to his evolutionary benefit if he was to run through the consequences of his actions by picturing it mentally in his head, and it is well-documented that seeing or imagining situations can elicit the same chemical and physiological reactions as actually being in the situation. It is hard to see how this level of foresight would be possible without serial consciousness, and so again I think this demonstrates that it is a genetic advantage, which helps to explain its existence."

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