

Consciousness: Myth to Reality

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Abstract

The phenomena of consciousness, which has been a debatable issue in the current theorising about the mind in the fields of philosophy, psychology and physical sciences like neuroscience and AI, had not always been seen from the same perspectives as we have today. Historically, it had been initiated by mythical perceptions and religious speculations within their own terminology and approaches they had at that times like supernatural and spiritual stances. Later it came in to the realm of philosophical investigations and discussed under the headings like mind-body problem and phenomenology, extensively. Which further initiated psychological and science oriented empirical approaches to deal with the mysterious and even so called non physical phenomena . Though the pace of this new approach has been slow yet it is undoubtedly efficient and really explaining at least some mysteries clouding the phenomena earlier, in understandable terms. The purpose of this paper is to point out some very basic conceptual and linguistic inconsistencies lying in our approaches towards dealing with the phenomena of consciousness which delude a clear conception of it. In this effort I will try to point out the inherent mythical attitudes which still effects our way of thinking when faced with an unknown phenomena though observable and experienced, like consciousness.

Keywords: consciousness, myth, reality, evolution, neuroscience, philosophy

Introduction

Life, that existed on earth since three thousand million years, comes of age when it first reflected on the questions of its own existence, as, Is there any meaning of life? What are we for? How this all observable universe came in to existence? What is the human? And the answers though partial when appeared first, were not in the sense of truth as what is, but in the form of myths, the primitive tool available to developing human brains to access confronting reality and respond accordingly to the situations, through out the course of ongoing evolutionary process, he was a part of. Without knowing the truth human race had been continuously busy in creating and recreating the myths about reality until his interaction with environment took a substantial turn at a point like the origin of language and culture, when evolution re modified the tools of imagination in to reason and observation necessary for better survival and further growth in that phase and with little findings which later added up in to a coherent and tenable account of things and phenomena like the origin of life by Charles Darwin and of universe by Copernicus, Galileo and others. And the benefit from these insights was clear that we no longer have to resort to superstition when faced with such fundamentally challenging questions though we still don't know the full explanation of everything but we have at least found a firm ground to put little steps in the realm of unknown reality with some comprehend able certainty. In the words of famous zoologist G G Simpson," the point I want to make now is that all attempts to answer the question about life before Darwin are worthless and that we will be better off if we ignore them completely". From the magic of myths(supernatural) to the magic of science(natural), we still wonder and wander about the mysteries of existence. Most importantly there has been a tremendous change in our way of perceiving and interpreting the term "reality". Reality is what exists or that existed before. But how do we know that something exists or existed? Well if there is any real evidence that it does or it did. For example we know about the existence of dinosaurs by evidence from fossils. And about other entities unobservable through naked senses like bacteria and galaxies by microscope and telescope. And in exceptional cases like DNA or distant black holes where even powerful microscopes or telescopes fail to show us how they look like , we restore to modelling and testing of models, which are accepted only when confirmed accordingly otherwise discarded happily. The recent discovery of gravitational waves from a distant supernova which supports the scientific hypothesis about the origin of universe we live in, is a clear example of evidence based reality rather it was created by god in just six days ! or things like that. Same criteria can be applied when it comes to origin of life and subsequently the origin of consciousness. Though we have stories about creation from mythology and religion but hardly they explain anything in real sense, I mean in terms of acceptable evidences. Rather they point to the nature of primitive man in terms of his own psychology or subjective experience instead of a real explanation of hardcore reality out there. By this I didn't mean that experiences like love, fear, joy are not part of reality but instead I mean that they depend for their existence on brains. Such emotions are intensively real to those who experience them but they did not exist before the brains did. Moreover every civilisation has its their own account of creation which differ with one another in substantial ways. Now which would you accept as the true explanation? I would say neither. Because taking the literal meaning of mythological and religious texts in terms of reality is the blunder common masses generally make. Which further is the cause of disparity and quarrels between them. Believing something when there is no real evidence to support is the germination point for all superstitions and blind faith, widespread in society which is poisonous for descending generations of young

minds. Moreover the supernatural stance over reality could hardly offer any true explanation of things we see around us in the existing world. And even worse it rules out any possibility of its ever being explained in understandable and testable terms. Because anything supernatural must by definition be beyond the reach of a natural explanation. It must be beyond the reach of science and the well established, tried and tested scientific method that has been responsible for our current understanding of reality around which works magnificently. Apart from discarding the literal meaning of texts regarding reality we must also be careful about the linguistic inconsistencies arising out of our philosophical explanations of any phenomena. We often either mix the context we are dealing with another or we misuse the vocabulary that is chosen for a specific explanation. This blunder results in a massive confusion and hocus-focus interpretation of the phenomena in hand. This is evident in case of providing an explanation of the phenomena we call consciousness. From its defining criteria to its origin and purpose we have taken some very wrong stances which are fundamentally inconsistent or vague with the facts science has to offer. For example the first mistake that we usually see is the claim about consciousness is that it is a non-physical entity different from the physical matter around us and in fact within us because we are made up of stuff from matter. This dualistic imaginary distinction not only lacks the explanation for the term non-physical but they also present no way for us to inquire in to it further, thus restoring to a pessimistic stance and give up attitude. Secondly, the approach to start exploring consciousness from the perspective of subjective experience or what it feels like, which is a manifestation of the underlying complex emotional structure of our brains resulted by the specific kind of information processing with in brain itself . By this again i did not mean that subjective experience is not a part of human consciousness but instead I mean that starting exploring a complex phenomena from a fundamentally vague concept like feelings which awaits scientific explanation yet in objective terms, will take us not much farther from the initial stance rather it will give rise to explanations that could not be tested and therefor will confine to metaphorical ones which are not much different from the mythical ones. It will be like manipulating and abusing the scientific vocabulary for the sake of personal emotional satisfaction which has nothing to do with the truth whatsoever. Instead we must shift our field of investigation to a concrete one at least available at present and approach the complexities of consciousness from comprehensible stance like the evolution. Because subjective experience and conscious behaviour is a part of our psychological reality which in turn not independent from our biology, a spring from physical sciences itself. Evolution, Which is a story of complexities arising out of simplest precursors. Since there has not always been human consciousness as we understand it now, it has to have arisen from prior phenomena that were not instances of consciousness. And if we try to inquire about what might have been present before and what have been involved in that transition, then we can get a better perspective on the complexities and the roles they play in creating the full fledged phenomena of consciousness, if we were successful in our attempt. In his elegant book, *Vehicles: Essays in synthetic psychology*, the neuroscientist Valentino Braitenberg describes a series of even more complicated autonomous mechanisms, gradually building from simple and utterly lifeless devices to entities that are impressively biological and psychological in flavour. But because we have taken the manifestation of consciousness in our behaviour that is its phenomenology, as given to us and wondered about what sort of hidden mechanisms in the brain could explain it. Now if we reverse the strategy and think about the evolution of brain mechanisms for doing things it does and try to see if anything that emerges gives us a plausible mechanism for explaining some of the puzzling behaviours of our conscious brains. Unlike most explanations in science, evolutionary explanations are essentially narratives, taking us from a time when something did not exist to a time when it did by a series of steps that the narratives explains, though their might lie some gaps hard to bridge instantly, as analogous to the origin of sex. There was a time when all the organisms that existed lacked gender, male or female and produced asexually as evident from organisms that still do so. Now somehow by some imaginable series of steps some of those organisms must have or might have evolved in to organisms that have gender as us. So what sort of conditions were required and why the necessary changes happened, are some of the deepest problems in contemporary evolutionary theory. There seems a nice parallel between origin of sexes and of consciousness in terms of the explanatory gaps and not only in this particular case but also in general any field of study where we have reached a certain depth, we face this dilemma of bridging the gaps between the known and unknown. One thing here should be clearly understood that the so called gaps exist only in our understanding of any phenomena and not in the phenomena itself out there. As rightly pointed out by Annie Besant about consciousness” the subject of the unfolding of consciousness in the being whose field of evolution is a solar system is one of the considerable difficulty; none of us may at present hope to do more than master a small portion of its complexity, but it may be possible to study it in our thinking and as may yield us a fairly clear outline to guide our future work“. To fill these gaps in our understanding we need a broad conceptual framework based on empirical scientific work rather than mere speculative thoughts and mysterious stances resorting to misleading interpretations and false satisfaction instead of providing a tenable explanation of an observable phenomena in hand. The another distinction which has been paralysing our efforts to understand reality is the dualistic tendencies arising out of the context confusing terminology as from ideal to realists, physical to non physical, mind and matter and more specifically subjective and objective in consciousness studies which has also been a concrete hiding place for all jargons and pseudo interpretations in a certain sense that they can defy any effort to explain a phenomena in understandable way and through it to mysticism. There is no doubt that being an important part of conscious human life subjectivity is a unique sphere where all our self reflecting thoughts and experiences appear to emerge to build a picture of reality which is very complex and unique to us as individuals. But in metaphorical sense it is also a home for the most dangerous enemy of knowledge, the illusion of knowledge itself which harbours all those distorted views and pseudo explanations which has kept alive all the mythical tendencies hidden in man when it comes to encounter the confronting reality even in modern times. It appears that modern world is not

rich enough in terms of myth but it is also true that at the level of individual subjective experience it has never completely disappeared as it makes itself felt in the dreams, fantasies and the longings of the modern man and an abundant psychological literature has now accustomed us to rediscover the big or little mythological tendencies in the half conscious or unconscious of every individual. Though it is equally true that in primitive and archaic societies myth happens to be the very foundation of social life, religious beliefs, personal values and culture while current languages confuses myth with something opposed to reality but primitive man in traditional societies saw it as the only valid revelation of reality because he had no tools to differentiate properly the psychological with the physical one at that time. But in modern times when man has taken giant steps in understanding reality as compared to primitives therefore instead of being prone to that psychology our efforts should be in the direction of understanding and investigating how mythical concepts, ideas and symbols are formed primarily and how they effect us in our comprehension of reality. Ernst Cassirer who devoted more time and thought to the philosophy of myth than anyone else, held that one could achieve systematic insight in to the inner forms of mythology not by explaining its origin or identifying its special objects or motives but by determining its sources of expression and type of consciousness that actually produce myths . This is precisely the aspect that concerns us here. To modern mind such contrivances of thought will seem like nebulous products of a dreaming fancy but in a certain sense they are and for this reason they lend themselves to decipherment by methods of complex psychology and advancing cognitive neurosciences. A lot of work has already been done by many pioneers of the fields like cultural anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists. This is certainly true that when we start to investigate any complex phenomena like consciousness we also have to confront the mythical mind which is a part of our evolutionary brain structures as well and which is the first to appear when we faced with new situations which stimulate our deep rooted old fears of unknown. And we may still be convinced by the explanations it puts forward but it will only result into linguistic inconsistencies with the prevailing scientific literature. For example we are evolved from apes but we are not apes in complete sense and though we are made up of atoms but not only atoms but we have also evolved to a more complex level of reality which is new and emerged from earlier ones. If you wish to go back and try to find out the modern man in apes than you certainly won't find that because it was yet to emerge. But modern man definitely has traits from that earlier pre cursor both biologically and psychologically. Same if you take the modern criteria of defining consciousness which in itself emerged at a later stage as linguists point out, it will be totally wrong to mistake it even for the precursors of consciousness from which it emerged successively. Though finding the chain of evolution in case of consciousness is a tough task but that doesn't mean that we should cling to the mysticism and pseudo explanations. Even when someone say that either you can have subjectivity at one time or objectivity. If you have subjectivity than you will loose objectivity or if you take an objective stance you will miss the important factor called subjectivity. I think this is the most absurd and even wrong stance to talk about anything. Rather I would say the objective stance which itself is a part of functioning of our brains is as important as the experiential part and when we are objective than we don't diminish the subjectivity but transcend to a next level of functioning where reason takes over the crude emotions. Like by evolving to modern man we haven't diminished the primates in us but they are still our part as evident from DNA and old brain parts where we still had their imprints as a part of our total identity. Therefor The real need is to understand their roles instead of seeing them opposing concepts. Because our whole effort is to decipher the experience we have subjectively in to understandable terms unlikely experiencing the experience which has been done previously by human, and for that purpose we need to investigate and approach consciousness from a hard core scientific perspective which will further develop the required terminology and concepts in scientific terms universally understand by all and not like the creationists myths which differ altogether with one other. Before that this is will be closed for a successful philosophical construction of a theory as it has previously been for religion and mythology earlier.

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