



## DOUBLE REPORT FROM LONDON

### What if there is no hard problem with consciousness?

Daniel Clement Dennett

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*Daniele Mario Cassaghi*

### Why isn't there more progress in philosophy?

David Chalmers

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*Mattia Sorgon*

## 1 What if there is no hard problem with consciousness?

How is it possible to distinguish a system which is conscious of its internal states from one which is not? In other terms, on which methods can we rely to discern a human being from a zombie with no “consciousness” at all? If I perceive red, I am, *quo* human being, *conscious* of the “redness” of the strawberry in front of me. How is it possible for a non-conscious system to be different from me? After all, it just perceives that strawberry without being internally aware of the “redness”. How is it possible, indeed, to differentiate two *behaviourally indistinguishable* systems on the basis of the presence of a certain conscious element within them? All these questions are what we call *The Hard Problem with Consciousness*: there is no a specific method to separate systems endowed with the so-called *consciousness* from those which work unconsciously.

The answer by Dennett to this problem is, as usual, radical: there is no such a problem. It makes no sense to think that there could be a difference between the conscious system and the zombie unaware of its internal states.

Dennett starts from the assumption according to which, when we talk about mental states, we use many metaphors: while we are representing an object, for example, nothing of that

object is actually present in our head. A satisfying Theory of Consciousness indeed should enable us to remove the gap between our metaphorical language of mental states and what actually goes on within our brains. To better understand what is meant by “metaphorical use of the language of mental states”, Dennett invites the audience to take part in an experiment. A rectangular image with certain features and colours is projected on the wall. We are then invited to stare at a cross, which is put exactly in the centre of the image. After a few tens of seconds, the image suddenly disappears, making way for the background white wall. All the participants state they have suddenly seen the picture of an American flag projected on the wall. Moreover, people in the audience share also the conviction that the shortest stripe of the flag were really red in colour. Then, Dennett asks: “What are we talking about?”. Actually, there are no red stripes on the wall, nor on the participants’ *retinae*. . . there might be something within their brains. Perhaps there is a *representation* of a red stripe. Fair enough, but whatever this representation is, *there is nothing red* inside the brains of the people. Maybe, we could say that, whatever it be, it seems to be a red stripe, but, again, nothing is red in our heads, nor what is *seeming* a red stripe. An analogous problem arises with the so-called rotating figures. They are set of circles of different alternate colours (yellow and blue) that give the illusion of a rotation. Nothing is moving neither on the wall, nor in our eyes, and finally, nor within our heads. Indeed, according to Dennett, we state about the presence of a rotating figure or a red stripe only in a *metaphorical way*.

The question now is whether or not we can considerate our “conscious” mental states (like the phenomena sketched above) as real representations. Dennett’s answer is ambiguous: both yes and no. They are indeed representations in the same way the micro-tracks on a DVD are. They are not *iconic* in respect to what they represent. They do not reproduce the features of what they refer to, but they carry information when decoded by the right *medium*. Their function is to encode the features they are designed to reproduce. So, it may happen sometimes, and it is common also for DVDs, that they lead to mental states that are *vision-like*, *hearing-like* etc. without being the vision and the hearing etc. themselves. Dennett claims that we are *unwitting creators of fictions*: we are forced to talk about every representation as a metaphor of what goes on within our neural processes.

But why do we not use a sort of ‘*literal speech*’ when we talk about mind and consciousness? To answer to this question, Dennett invites us to think about the *Primes Tribe*. They have just a rough language which can distinguish just plants, animals and non-living objects only. If they were transported to the civilised world, they would come back home with a lot of strange stories about what they have seen there. To refer to a car, for example, they would say: “I have just seen a strange animal. You can get into it and it carries you wherever you want”. They are indeed unwitting metaphors makers. They try to describe the reality as reliably as they can by their poor language. According to Dennett, we are in the same situation. We try to describe what is going on within our brain by our lacking language, which was made to refer to things outside us and not inside us, what goes on within our brains. The ideal goal, again, for a good theory of consciousness would be to re-connect neurosciences with the phenomenological (metaphorical) description by every individual of the respective world.

This theory of consciousness must not fall into the dualist snare of the *Cartesian Theatre*, according to which the conscious states would be the product of an internal (to the mind) representation of something external. If the representation were within our head, it would be consumed by something else from our body. There would have to be within us a *homunculus* that consumes the representation. *Prima facie*, the *Cartesian Theatre* seems an unproblem-

atic scenario with no manifest unsoundness. However, a better analysis shows how it is guilty of an infinite regress: the consumer *homunculus* should have *another* consumer *homunculus* in its head and so on. . . Moreover, from an empirical point of view, Dennett maintains that it is hard to see how this infinite regress could be distributed in our brains. The mistake arises from the so-called “*second transduction*”. We must not think that once the external *stimuli* are encoded in the “neurone language” than, they are re-coded for the second time in order to make the representation ready for the consumer *homunculus*. According to Dennett, once the information is encoded, it does not change its code anymore. Otherwise, we would be really led to the infinite regress: we would need a second codification for the second *homunculus*, a third one for the third etc. If we assume just one transduction of information going from the *transducers*, our senses, to the *effectors*, the mechanisms responsible for the actions as outputs, it will make no sense to think about the system as mediated by states of consciousness. In other words the product of the perception is not a conscious experience: it is an *intelligent action* within the world, according to this input-output schema.

The issue now turns on how this system work(s). For example, from the point of view of the *Bayesian expectations* and the *Gibson’s affordances*. Briefly, when we perceive something, we give rise to some expectations regarding that thing. For example, if we observe some people walking upon a bridge, we will expect, the more we get closer, to see their clothes in detail, what they are carrying and so on. . . we feel a certain disappointment (or disorientation), when we realise them to be just spots on a canvas and that, indeed, those perceptions are not possible. The evolution makes us capable of perceiving as many *affordances* as possible<sup>1</sup>. In the end, these *affordances* would be elaborated in a Bayesian way, following a probability-of-occurrence criterion. To sum up, when we perceive, we make a lot of expectation regarding what is important for us in that situation. And Dennett says that the one of most important things for us is precisely the self. In some way we give rise to expectations about our own behaviour. This means, for example, that there actually are projections of internal properties on the external world (for example desires), that lead us to the tendency to act (Here Dennett states to refer to Sellar’s manifest images).

During the finale of the talk, Dennett replies to whom accuses him to deny the presence of a self, necessary for attributing experience. The answer is well known. An entity like the self is unacceptable for everyone interested in *Cognitive Sciences* qua *Sciences*. Admitting a first-person-entity denies the possibility to formulate theories, which, as we know, are not liable to this subjectivity. We can state a theory of cognition only by getting rid of the subject. It is not a matter of de-humanising people, Dennett says. It is true the opposite: we want to see how much wonderful these robot/zombies are. . . they can even be humans!

## References

- R.A. Wilson and F.C. Keil, eds. (2001). *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

<sup>1</sup>According to the *MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, the *affordances* can be seen as ‘what the environment offers to the animal’ (and to the human being), as, for example, surfaces-to-lean-on, tools-to-manipulate etc. While processing the information on the external *stimuli*, often these properties regarding the possibility to interact with what is perceived get into the process. However it has to be pointed out that this very often requires learning and training from the individual. See (Wilson and Keil, 2001, pp. 4-6).

## 2 Why isn't there more progress in philosophy?

There has not been large collective convergence on the big questions of philosophy. Concerning the most fundamental issues, such as the mind-body problem, the access to the external world, or the principles of morality, the debate is still very intense and controversial. Therefore, philosophy has not already reached neither a definitive result on its major topics and every theoretical perspective is still a viable position within the debate.

Considering this kind of concerns, David J. Chalmers starts his talk presenting a more structured argument which grounds the *central thesis* of the lack of philosophical progress:

1. There has not been large collective convergence on the big questions of philosophy.
2. If there has not been large collective convergence on the big questions of philosophy, then there has not been large collective convergence on the truths of the big questions of philosophy.
3. ∴ Therefore, there has not been large collective convergence on the truths of the big questions of philosophy.

This argument is valid. Nevertheless, states the author, its premises can be studied in depth in order to analyse whether it is also sound. Firstly, (1) is clearly the empirical premise which sustains the argument. It is based on the 2009 PhilPapers Survey (Bourget and Chalmers, 2014), which surveyed professional philosophers on answers to thirty important questions in philosophy. In summary, the results were:

1. A priori knowledge: yes 71%, no 18%, other 11%.
2. Abstract objects: Platonism 39%, nominalism 38%, other 23%.
3. Aesthetic value: objective 41%, subjective 35%, other 24%.
4. Analytic/synthetic distinction: yes 65%, no 27%, other 8%.
5. Epistemic justification: externalism 43%, internalism 26%, other 1%.
6. External world: non-skeptical realism 82%, skepticism 5%, idealism 4%, other 9%.
7. Free will: compatibilism 59%, libertarianism 14%, no free will 12%, other 15%.
8. God: atheism 73%, theism 15%, other 13%.
9. Knowledge claims: contextualism 40%, invariantism 31%, relativism 3%, other 26%.
10. Knowledge: empiricism 35%, rationalism 28%, other 37%.
11. Laws of nature: non-Humean 57%, Humean 25%, other 18%.
12. Logic: classical 52%, non-classical 15%, other 33%.
13. Mental content: externalism 51%, internalism 20%, other 29%.
14. Meta-ethics: moral realism 56%, moral anti-realism 28%, other 16%.
15. Metaphilosophy: naturalism 50%, non-naturalism 26%, other 24%.
16. Mind: physicalism 57%, non-physicalism 27%, other 16%.

17. Moral judgment: cognitivism 66%, non-cognitivism 17%, other 17%.
18. Moral motivation: internalism 35%, externalism 30%, other 35%.
19. Newcomb's problem: two boxes 31%, one box 21%, other 47%.
20. Normative ethics: deontology 26%, consequentialism 24%, virtue ethics 18%, other 32%.
21. Perceptual experience: representationalism 32%, qualia theory 12%, disjunctivism 11%, sense-datum theory 3%, other 42%.
22. Personal identity: psychological view 34%, biological view 17%, further-factview 12%, other 37%.
23. Politics: egalitarianism 35%, communitarianism 14%, libertarianism 10%, other 41%.
24. Proper names: Millian 34%, Fregean 29%, other 37%.
25. Science: scientific realism 75%, scientific anti-realism 12%, other 13%.
26. Teletransporter: survival 36%, death 31%, other 33%.
27. Time: B-theory 26%, A-theory 16%, other 58%.
28. Trolley problem: switch 68%, don't switch 8%, other 24%.
29. Truth: correspondence 51%, deflationary 25%, epistemic 7%, other 17%.
30. Zombies: conceivable but not metaphysically possible 36%, metaphysically possible 23%, inconceivable 16%, other 25%.

These results show a high degree of disagreement on central questions. Of course, in order to be compelling, these data should be compared to other past surveys, which could consider such philosophical debates in 1909, 1809, and so on. Moreover, it would be interesting to consider also analogous surveys in other fields, such as the MathPapers Survey, the PhysPapers survey, the ChemPapers Survey, the BioPapers Survey, and so on. Nevertheless, Chalmers considers highly probable that even in that case we would find much less convergence on the big questions in philosophy than on corresponding problems in other fields.

Secondly, the connection between *convergence* and *truth* stated in (2) is not at all a logical truth. This premise takes indeed for granted that philosophical problems have to be conceived only in terms of true and false, not considering other alternative (and perhaps more plausible) meta-philosophical accounts. However, Chalmers points out how without a sufficient collective agreement on philosophical issues a collective philosophical knowledge is evidently not possible.

Therefore, in order to bypass what seems to be a solid argument against philosophical progress, Chalmers considers other weaker possible form of progress. Dropping some elements from the *central thesis*, he then goes through the analysis of new revised candidates for such notion.

Dropping *large*, «there has been (non-large) collective convergence to the truth on big questions of philosophy», the thesis would admit at least two sorts of convergence: a *major* convergence on a few questions (such as logic, god, or a priori knowledge), and a *minor* convergence on other questions. In this way philosophy would maintain a concept of progress strictly related to some core questions, discharging disagreement on particular problems. But

this move would be either untenable and unsatisfactory, the history of philosophy proves indeed that philosophical debates have faced various conceptual revolutions, providing radical shifts mainly within what were once considered core elements.

Dropping *collective*, «there has been large (non-collective) convergence to the truth on big questions of philosophy», the thesis would allow that various individuals, or even local groups or sub-communities, have themselves had large convergence on big issues. But this kind of convergence, except in rare cases, has not ever led to stable community-wide convergence. And even in those cases, it has always been restricted to certain local temporal periods, involving thus a sort of convergence which is not able to spread out over the entire community or persist through time.

Dropping *big*, «there has been large collective convergence to the truth on (non-big) questions of philosophy», the thesis would permit that it has been achieved large collective convergence on some smaller theses. Indeed some cases seem to confirm this view: the theses that knowledge is not just justified true belief and that conditional probabilities are not probabilities of conditionals are solid results of philosophical research. But these outcomes have never proved to be able to really approach the answers to the big questions, hence adopting this view would mean to give them up.

Dropping *convergence to the truth*, «there has been large collective advances (not involving convergence to the truth) on big questions of philosophy», the thesis would be consistent with many forms of philosophical progress not involving the notion of truth. During the centuries philosophy has certainly developed and increased its understanding of the big issues, new areas of the philosophical domain have been explored, new methods have been adopted and many arguments have been improved. In some specific cases philosophy has been even applied to the world. But all these forms of progress detach philosophy from truth and, therefore, lead to explicitly abandon a traditional value of philosophical research. Claiming his *pluralist position* about philosophical progress, according to which different values can be realized through philosophy, the author however notes how truth is fundamental for the notion of collective knowledge: leaving it out would then mean giving up also the idea of philosophical knowledge.

Examined all these possibilities, Chalmers focuses on a different aspect of the issue. Given or not the possibility of a philosophical progress indeed, one question still arises: what explains the lack of collective progress of philosophy in contrast with sciences? An immediate answer refers to the powerless of philosophical method. While empirical sciences rely on the experimental method and mathematics on the analytical deductive method, both of which lead to progress, philosophy relies on the weaker basis of argumentation, which has not this property. Furthermore, whilst science and mathematics base their reasoning on strong and stable premises, philosophy often finds its arguments on premises which are deniable without too much cost. Therefore, philosophical arguments are not able to lead to a widespread agreement but only to a sophisticated disagreement. Could then philosophy adopt a new method? Linguistic philosophy, empirical philosophy, phenomenology, formal philosophy are all brilliant perspectives that have led to many new insights, but not to convergence. According to Chalmers, they have mainly led to more sophisticated versions of old disagreements.

Good arguments do not lead hence to agreement. Arguments for strong conclusions in philosophy, contrary to science and mathematics, almost always ground on easily refutable premises. But why is philosophical convergence so difficult to achieve? Chalmers lists some possible answers:

- *Anti-realism*: “there is no convergence to the truth because there are no objective truths to be had in the relevant domains”.
- *Verbal disputes*: “there is no convergence to the truth because participants involved in the debate are simply talking past each other”.
- *Self-selection*: “there is no convergence to the truth because when there is sufficiently widespread agreement on a question, it ceases to be a philosophical question”.
- *Sociological factors*: “there is no convergence to the truth because some people know the truth, but sociological factors prevented others from agreeing”.

According to the author, all these answers are partially correct, but they do not collectively provide a full explanation of the subject. Concluding his talk, Chalmers wonders whether the answers to the big questions are knowable in principle. Focusing indeed on the hardest cases in philosophy, he highlights how these answers are conceived as knowable by ideal reasoners, but not known by us. Therefore, a last fundamental question arises: are philosophical problems humanly unsolvable or are they humanly solvable and just unsolved? Providing his half-full-glass conclusion, Chalmers answers as follows:

“I don’t know the answer to this question, but I think that I could reach it. The problems are solvable but as yet unsolved. We are still learning to do philosophy well. We just have to keep doing it and see where it leads.”

### References

- D. Bourget and D.J. Chalmers (2014). “What do philosophers believe?” In: *Philosophical Studies*. URL: <http://consc.net/papers.html>. Forthcoming.
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