

# CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN FAVOUR OF A PRAGMATIC DUALISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

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Consciousness and self-consciousness, or self-understanding, are among the central concepts of philosophy in its European tradition – like nature and reason. Man is the animal which is conscious of its doings, its cognition and its situation in the world and which is able to relate, at the same time, to this consciousness cognitively and reflectively. Philosophy addresses these relationships in the domain of epistemology, but increasingly so, too, does natural science in the form of (cognitive) neuroscience and, in particular, brain research. The natural sciences are getting involved with philosophical conceptions, but philosophy is getting equally involved with scientific procedures and results. This latter proceeds by way of the philosophy of science (of the neurosciences), as well as by way of more anthropological approaches. Knowledge about man is scientific and philosophical (epistemological and anthropological) at the same time. This gives rise to conflicts, especially when scientific knowledge claims to encompass all knowledge of man. Everything that is the case is amenable to scientific explanation – thus the fundamental conviction of the natural sciences. Is this also the case with consciousness and self-consciousness?

As far as the natural sciences are concerned, the objective is to explain how consciousness works from the physiological point of view and what capacities it has – in the words of the brain researcher: “to attribute a large part of our cognitive and motoric capacities to the brain and to conceive of deficiencies of these functions as entirely standard organic diseases”.<sup>1</sup> As far as philosophy is concerned, the objective is to explain from the epistemological point of view how consciousness is mirrored in its cognition and its other subjective performances. The cognition and the reflection of this mirroring, in turn, is self-consciousness. The natural sciences and philosophy are also at loggerheads about this topic, self-consciousness. Is it possible to ‘explain’ self-consciousness just like it is possible to explain consciousness,

<sup>1</sup> W. Singer, “Einführung”, in: *Gehirn und Bewusstsein*, Heidelberg and Berlin and Oxford 1994, p.VII, my translation.

or is it of a different kind? The natural sciences say no, philosophy says yes, and tries to express this in the conceptions used – for instance the concept of the *self* or the *ego*. In what follows, divided in three parts, I present a critical analysis of the philosophical and scientific approaches, respectively, but I shall begin with a short recollection of the career of the concepts of consciousness and self-consciousness.

## 1. The ego

Consciousness has always been understood as a cognition that is not just displayed in mere behaviour but which articulates itself as a ‘consciousness of something’. To articulate here means: to differentiate, to conceptualize, to assess, to connect the perceived (what is given in perception) with the constructed (what is determined in thought). In the process consciousness becomes, in modern terminology, a property of the mental or of mental states and conditions. This finds its epistemological expression in the Aristotelian concept of thinking, *noesis*, complementing a mere perception with an aspect of intentionality: consciousness as an action directed towards a certain matter of fact or as object-related knowing, which articulates itself linguistically (conceptually).

In contrast to the concept of consciousness as object-related perception, the concept of self-consciousness means the perception of an object-related perception (and other subjective performances), a consciousness, thus, which becomes self-reflective and to this extent also may be understood as condition of all cognition in its philosophic and scientific forms. Also this aspect may already be found in Aristotle, namely in the phrase “thinking of thinking” (νόησις νοήσεως),<sup>2</sup> where Aristotle assigns the concept of a pure self-consciousness to the concept of a pure reason, which turns out to be a condition of philosophy and science.<sup>3</sup> In Descartes, this issue becomes the fundamental principle of his philosophy of science and metaphysics; it also does this in the further development of both rationalist and empiricist epistemological perspectives. In Leibniz, for instance, the perceptions of the (rational) monads (souls) are apperceptions, defined as reflective consciousness, in Locke, the ‘ideas of reflection’ are the result of perceiving one’s own cognitions. At the same time, the concept of self-consciousness is related to the concept of an I-substance, the *ego*, which in Kant – where all currents of

<sup>2</sup> *Met.* 9.1074b34. [A me risulta Book 12]

<sup>3</sup> On this and the further history of the concept of self-consciousness, see C.F. Gethmann, “Selbstbewusstsein”, in: J. Mittelstrass (Ed.), *Enzyklopaedie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*, vol. III, Stuttgart and Weimar 1995, pp. 755–759.

philosophical tradition meet and are put on new, critical foundations – in turn finds its transcendental reformulation.<sup>4</sup>

In Kant's terminology, the *ego*, in reference to itself, perceives itself as *appearance*, not as substance, and it is empirically given only in this sense. With the concept of the *transcendental subject*, this idea gains epistemological significance as the principle of unity of knowledge and things: "For inner experience in general and its possibility, or perception in general and its relation to another perception, without any particular distinction or empirical determination being given in it, cannot be regarded as empirical cognition, but must be regarded as cognition of the empirical in general, and belongs to the investigation of the possibility of every experience, which is of course transcendental".<sup>5</sup> Self-consciousness, in this sense, again means the ability of the subject to refer, with the intention of knowing, to its own object-related knowing. Kant uses here the well-known formula: "The *I think* must be able to accompany all my representations", followed by the explanation: "for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing for me".<sup>6</sup> From here the further development leads on the one hand, against the idealistic theory of the *ego* and self-consciousness, to a philosophy of concrete subjectivity, to a phenomenology of *ego*-perceptions and, on the other hand, to psychological theories as well as analytical approaches.

In this development, the concept of the *self* is either identical with the concept of the *ego* or, in contrast to this concept, emphasizes the more phenomenological aspects of individual forms of existence and self-understanding. For Leibniz, it was self-reflection that makes it possible to say 'I', Kant distinguishes between a *determining self* (thought) and a *determinable self* (the thinking subject) without associating this distinction with any distinctions between *ego* and *self*. In contrast to the identity of the *ego* by which more abstract aspects are emphasized – these aspects still influenced Husserl's concept

<sup>4</sup> The following is closely based on an earlier account: J. Mittelstrass, "Le soi philosophique et l'identité de la rationalité philosophique", in: E.D. Carosella *et al.* (Eds.), *L'identité changeante de l'individu. La constante construction du Soi*, Paris 2008, pp. 203-212 (especially pp. 207-210); English version: "The Philosophical Self and the Identity of Philosophical Rationality", in: J. Chr. Heilinger *et al.* (Eds.), *Individualität und Selbstbestimmung*, Berlin 2009, pp. 55-61 (especially pp. 58-59).

<sup>5</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* B 401 (translation from *Critique of Pure Reason* [transl. and ed. P. Guyer and A.W. Wood], Cambridge 1998, p. 412).

<sup>6</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* B 132-133 (translation from *Critique of Pure Reason* [see footnote 5], p. 246).

of the transcendental *ego* –, the concept of the *self*, for instance in Heidegger, aims at the phenomenal variety of personal identity (the ‘authentically existing self’,<sup>7</sup> ‘*Dasein*’ [existence] as ‘being-within-the-world’).

As already pointed out, the concept of reflection is closely related to the concepts of the *ego* and the *self* or rather the concept of self-consciousness. This concept stands for the self-ascertainment of the *ego* or the *self*, in epistemological terms for the ‘*I think*’ which, according to Kant, accompanies all judgements and all activities of the understanding. Thought, in this respect, is self-reflexive by nature and, correspondingly, so is the cogitating *ego* and the cogitating *self*.

A further step is made by Fichte when he says that in thinking the *ego* creates itself. Here, the *ego* is perceived as absolute *ego*, as pure self-performance that even constitutes in itself the difference between *ego* and non-*ego*, i.e. nature. With this, a logical level is reached where it is no longer the constitution of the individual that is at stake (according to the related concepts of *ego*-identity and *self*-identity) but, as in Kant in an epistemological framework, the constitution of a philosophical *ego* or philosophical *self* – in Kant’s terminology: the constitution of a transcendental subject. The identity of this subject consists in the fact that it is neither the particular (empirical) subject nor the universal (theoretical) subject, but the condition of both. In this sense, Wittgenstein writes: “The subject does not belong to the world, but it is a limit of the world”.<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein here refers to the individual subject, but his statement is also precisely true in view of the fact that the acting *ego* (Kant: the determining *ego*), in its performances, cannot be grasped theoretically.<sup>9</sup> Just this is expressed in the concepts of reflectivity and the transcendental.

What is expressed by the terminology of *ego* or *self*, as well as in the expression that the acting or determining *ego* cannot be grasped theoretically, marks the frontier at which the natural sciences in the figure of brain research and philosophy in the form of epistemology stand opposed to one another in critical conflict.

## 2. Science and the philosophy of mind

Where a science claims to explain everything or at least a great variety of many different things with the same method, it either becomes dogmatic

<sup>7</sup> *Sein und Zeit*, 8th ed., Tübingen 1957, p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 5.632 (translation from: *Tractatus logico-philosophicus. With an Introduction by Bertrand Russell*, London 1922, 1947, p.151).

<sup>9</sup> See K. Lorenz, “Identität”, in: J. Mittelstrass (Ed.), *Enzyklopaedie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*, 2nd ed. vol. III, Stuttgart and Weimar 2008, pp. 530–534.

or lets itself be guided by a methodological and theoretical paradigm that makes a claim to universality. The kind of physicalism propounded in the context of Logical Empiricism is an example. It says that all knowing may be expressed using the language of physics and, what is more, that all scientific theories are ultimately reducible to theories of physics. This is an expression of the covert or open *reductionism* of the natural sciences, that is, the programmatic idea of tracing back scientific explanations to uniform notions of a conceptual, methodological and theoretical kind, aiming at a universal explanatory competence. Philosophically, in the traditional sense, this is a variety of *monism*, which in this case leads to a *naturalism*. Naturalism claims that scientific claims of validity are to be traced back to natural facts (that is, facts captured by science), which implies a naturalizing of cognition itself. In the neurosciences, especially in brain research, such a claim is based on the thesis, that also characterizes physicalism, of the causal closure of the physical world. That would include, accordingly, also the spheres of consciousness and self-consciousness.

In modern philosophy, more specifically in the philosophy of mind, this corresponds to so-called Eliminative Materialism and the so-called Identity Theory, especially in the theoretical variety of type-identity. According to Eliminative Materialism, cognitive psychology and folk psychology will be replaced, materially and conceptually, by progress in neurophysiology;<sup>10</sup> according to the Identity Theory, mental states and processes are identical to states and processes of the human brain.<sup>11</sup> Following the theory of type-identity, this includes the claim of a (future) reducibility of psychological statements to neurophysiological laws.<sup>12</sup> Thus Eliminative Materialism and the Identity Theory represent the philosophical foundations of the reductionist claims of (parts of) brain research, to be (or to become) the 'whole' explanation in matters of consciousness and self-consciousness.

<sup>10</sup> See P.M. Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes", *The Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981), pp. 67-90; P.S. Churchland, *Neurophilosophy. Toward a Unified Science of the Mind/Brain*, Cambridge Mass. and London 1986, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> See H. Feigl, *The 'Mental' and the 'Physical'. The Essay [1958] and a Postscript*, Minneapolis Minn. 1967; J.J.C. Smart, "The Mind/Brain Identity Theory", in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2011 Edition)*, E.N. Zalta (Ed.), URL <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/mind-identity/>

<sup>12</sup> For an account and discussion of various theories in the domain of the philosophy of mind see M. Carrier and J. Mittelstrass, *Mind, Brain, Behavior. The Mind-Body Problem and the Philosophy of Psychology*, Berlin and New York 1991, also M. Carrier, "Philosophy of mind", in: J. Mittelstrass (Ed.), *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*, vol. III, pp. 220-226.

By no means, however, have all issues been resolved, as far as science or philosophy is concerned. In fact, philosophy of mind leads to a trilemma, which according to B. Falkenburg may be represented by the following three theses: “*Radical diversity*: mental phenomena, that is, the mental states, processes or events which we experience, are not physical. In other words, they are *strictly different* from all physical phenomena. *Mental causation*: Mental phenomena may *cause* physical phenomena, that is, our conscious intentions may cause bodily movements in the external world. *Causal closure*: The domain of physical phenomena is causally closed, that is, physical states, processes and events have only *physical* but no non-physical causes”.<sup>13</sup>

The third thesis is the thesis adopted by large parts of the cognitive neurosciences. It corresponds, in the philosophy of mind, to the Identity Theory understood as a theory of type-identity and thus philosophically represents a reductionist and naturalist worldview. But it is built on sand. In fact, the cognitive neurosciences, and in particular the brain sciences, have not managed to demonstrate causal (neuronal) mechanisms which could explain consciousness, let alone self-consciousness – and thus the interactions of brain and mind. “Consciousness is and remains mysterious”.<sup>14</sup> By making reference to the thesis of causal closure of nature, this position proves to be unfounded from the scientific point of view, and so does the thesis of determinism it endorses – there is no uniform principle of causation in modern physics which could serve as a foundation for a strict determinism – and from the philosophical point of view it proves to be metaphysical.<sup>15</sup> For instance in quantum theory, probabilistic state descriptions of micro-objects lead to indeterminist theories; in philosophy, metaphysical points of view give way to conceptions from the philosophy of science and language. But thus the trilemma mentioned above is losing its philosophical significance: the first and the second thesis remain philosophically viable, the third does not. It is the language of the cognitive neurosciences in particular that give the false impression of neuronal determinism and thus a worldview which seemingly does not leave space for the distinction between physical and non-physical phenomena anymore.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> B. Falkenburg, *Mythos Determinismus. Wieviel erklärt uns die Hirnforschung?*, Berlin and Heidelberg 2012, pp. 28–29, my translation.

<sup>14</sup> B. Falkenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 379.

<sup>15</sup> See B. Falkenburg, *op. cit.*, pp. 370–378.

<sup>16</sup> On this and for a critique of this worldview, see M.R. Bennett and P.M. St. Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, Malden Mass. and Oxford, and Carlton 2003; also P. Janich, *Kein neues Menschenbild. Zur Sprache der Hirnforschung*, Frankfurt 2009. Janich draws attention to the consequences of an alleged neuronal determinism, namely

Mediating between the positions of strict neuronal determinism and that of metaphysical dualism as supported by the rationalist tradition, but also, for instance, by Popper and Eccles<sup>17</sup> (the independent existence of mental and physical states), today there also is the conception of *pragmatic dualism*.<sup>18</sup> This view leaves the theoretical possibility of body-mind-identity open, but shows how psychophysical interactionism is the most convincing option, given the current state of science, also avoiding the above-mentioned trilemma. ‘Consciousness’, ‘self-consciousness’, and ‘ego’ are dualistic terms; they cannot be formed in a monistic conception. They are titles of a specifically philosophical way of orientating oneself in thought and through thought without blocking the way to science. That means: the conception of pragmatic dualism neither anticipates future scientific developments nor does it exclude any particular scientific developments, nor does it simply adopt uncritically earlier metaphysical positions developed in the context of the so-called mind-body problem.

### 3. Free Will

Dualist and monist views of consciousness and self-consciousness clash nowhere as vehemently as they do on the question of *free will*. Not just for philosophical reason, but also for common sense, conscious decisions are the causes of actions. First we decide, then we act; first there is consciousness, then there is the action. In opposition to that stands the thesis of the neurophysiologist that consciousness is a merely *interpreting* and not an acting authority: it is not consciousness that moves; other, physical and mental circumstances move. On that view the actual causes of actions are connected to physical and psychological mechanisms, which are not amenable to introspection, in which consciousness is looking at itself, as it were, and thus not amenable to conscious experience. But this would mean that consciousness would not have a privileged access to the originating conditions of an action; instead it would find itself in the position of an external spectator, as it were. It is not influencing decisions, but only registering them and

the obligation to attribute sense and reference to neuronal states and processes themselves: “When a brain researcher makes the claim that ‘ultimately’ the meaning and validity of linguistic communication should be explicable via neuronal functions, which already have meaning and validity, he is fudging. He is cheating his way to acceptance of his claim by already attributing the properties of meaningful speech to the material building blocks of his models of the brain” (*op. cit.*, p. 73, my translation).

<sup>17</sup> K.R. Popper and J.C. Eccles, *The Self and Its Brain*, Berlin and London and New York 1977, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> M. Carrier and J. Mittelstrass, *Mind, Brain, Behavior* (footnote 12).

dressing them in a meaning that appears plausible. It invents good reasons, which however do not have anything to do with the actual causes. It is quite clear that this conception appears rather absurd, considered against the background of our self-experience and our self-understanding. How could we be able to imagine that consciousness, experienced subjectively as the source of our activities should be causally ineffective.

Already for Greek thought, the concept of the will marks the passage from prudence or deliberation to action; the freedom of the will accordingly meant the space of action between doing and not doing something. The issue was the concept of well-founded willing, not the search after some mysterious substance in body, soul or reason. A person whose actions are guided by rational considerations is free, or rightly called the possessor of a free will. The further philosophical development went a different way. The will is now considered a separate source of action, next to reason. By leaving behind the prudence-model of the will problems of determinism arise for the first time. They do not concern the idea of free action but rather the idea of free willing, that is, the idea of the free will as an uncaused willing. The thesis is: We may do or not do what we will; but we cannot will or not will whatever we will. This is how Schopenhauer's writings and his thesis of the world as will and representation is to be read.

The right keyword gets voiced (as so often is the case) with Kant. Next to a 'causality according to the laws of nature' there is a 'causality of freedom'. The issue is again (just like in Greek thought) *freedom of action*, not some sort of substance, called freedom or free will, and the problem of well-founded (rational) action, in traditional terminology: the problem of a rational (or good) will. 'Causality of freedom' – this is, in other words, the capacity to act according to *principles*. The point is demands (in the sense of principles) addressed to ourselves, and the realization of these demands. Everybody, including the natural scientist, understands what is meant by this, even if it is a 'causality according to the laws of nature' and not a 'causality of freedom' that he is looking for as scientist. Using the terminology of freedom and the will: we are free in formulating the principles and in (willingly) following them. It is not the free will that is the problem, but the rational will (and thus the determination of the will as self-determination), articulated in the demand to act according to rational reasons.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See J. Mittelstrass, "Der arme Wille. Zur Leidensgeschichte des Willens in der Philosophie", in: H. Heckhausen *et al.* (Eds.), *Jenseits des Rubikon. Der Wille in den Humanwissenschaften*, Berlin etc. 1987, pp. 33–48, also in: J. Mittelstrass, *Der Flug der Eule. Von der Vernunft der Wissenschaft und der Aufgabe der Philosophie*, Frankfurt 1989, pp. 142–163.



When people see this differently and take the causal closure of nature for granted, as natural scientists do, it is primarily *semantic* problems that cloud the view on the differences. In this particular case, the scientific side is unable to imagine anything else than that the non-scientific positions supported by others will eventually join them in believing that the decision between ‘(free will) exists’ and ‘(free will) does not exist’ will be made on experimental grounds, so to speak, that semantic problems are mere pseudo-problems. But the untenable position of causal closure and the arguments brought forward for pragmatic dualism render it obvious that they are not pseudo-problems. It is, in any case, also true that if the claim that the will is causally determined throughout were true, then that claim itself and its claim to validity would be determined causally, that is, via natural causalities. Or to put it differently: a world without freedom would be a world without *reasons*, and for this reason – this is often overlooked by the reductionist and naturalist approaches – a world without science. Hence: science itself is the most beautiful refutation of the scientific negation of a free will.<sup>20</sup>

So, too, in the question of the freedom of the will it is important not to overshoot the scientific target, namely the explanation of physical and mental phenomena, in the direction of the unity of the physical world, and to take semantic matters seriously. Philosophy should take account of scientific developments, but science should also acknowledge philosophical distinctions. It appears that the conception of pragmatic dualism provides the best basis for this.

<sup>20</sup> Also the Libet experiments, according to which 300 milliseconds before a conscious ‘act of the will’ takes place, the corresponding readiness potential may already be measured, only to yield the desired conclusion, that we are not free in our decisions but determined by natural causalities if the muscle contraction taking place after the readiness potential has built up may be interpreted as an act of the will or expression of such an act. But precisely this needs to be also justified.