

Consciousness and the Noumenon

A Projection Account of Why the Mind Cannot Be Found Among Objects

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ABSTRACT In earlier work I defended *projection realism*: the thesis that the world of experience is the projection of a state with more independent components than the three dimensions of space and one of time in which we observe it. Here I draw a consequence for the philosophy of mind. The thesis gives Kant's distinction between phenomenon and noumenon a new and more tractable sense: the phenomenon is the three-dimensional world of experience, the noumenon the larger space of which it is a projection, and the noumenon is known structurally, by what the phenomenon cannot explain on its own. I then argue that consciousness belongs to the noumenon. The hypothesis explains three stubborn facts at once: that every search for consciousness among spatial objects finds its correlates and never the thing itself; that we perceive other minds only as intention, never as such; and that the relation between brain and mind has the structure of two perfectly correlated views of one object. I compare the view with substance dualism, physicalism, Russellian monism and Bohm's implicate order, answer five objections, and draw a conclusion about artificial systems built entirely within the projection.

KEYWORDS consciousness; hard problem; noumenon; projection; intentionality; neural correlates; Russellian monism; implicate order; artificial intelligence

I. INTRODUCTION

Three centuries after Leibniz asked his readers to walk into a thinking machine enlarged to the size of a mill, and find there only parts pushing parts and nothing that would explain a perception (Leibniz 1714), the situation is in one respect unchanged. Neuroscience has walked into the mill with instruments Leibniz could not have imagined. It has found, with great precision, activity that accompanies experience. It has not found experience as an object among the others, and its most careful practitioners do not claim that it has (Crick and Koch 1990; Chalmers 1995).

Philosophers have responded in two broad ways. Some hold that the gap is epistemic and will close, as the gap between life and chemistry closed; others that it is metaphysical and will not. A third, more cautious position holds that the gap is real but that we are constitutionally unable to see across it (McGinn 1989). This paper offers a fourth. It proposes that the gap has a definite geometry: that it is the gap between a projection and what is projected, and that consciousness is on the far side of it.

The proposal rests on a thesis defended elsewhere, which I restate in Section 2. Section 3 draws from it a new reading of Kant's phenomenon and noumenon. Section 4 states the thesis about consciousness, and Sections 5 to 7 show what it explains. Section 8 situates the view among its rivals, Section 9 answers objections, and Section 10 concerns artificial minds.

2. PROJECTION REALISM

The thesis of projection realism is that states of the world have more independent components than the four of space and time, that observation is a projection of those states, and that features of the projection are liable to be mistaken for features of the object. Three cases motivate it.

The imaginary roots. The equation $x^2 + 4 = 0$ has no solution on the real line. Represented in the plane (Wessel 1799; Argand 1806; Gauss 1831), its solutions are real points two units along a perpendicular axis. What had been called impossible was located in a direction the line does not contain. *The invisible velocity.* A photograph of a moving body and of the same body at rest in the same configuration are identical; velocity is an independent component of the state, invisible at an instant and known through what it does to successive images. *The entangled pair.* Two particles prepared together and separated exhibit correlations that no account in which each carries its own separate properties can reproduce (Bell 1964; Hensen et al. 2015). The simplest reading is that the pair is one state, with more components than space and time, observed through two windows.

In each case the strangeness is not in the object but in the number of dimensions in which it is viewed. The projection is not false; it is lawfully caused by what it projects. But it is poorer, and one who takes it for the whole will meet paradoxes that the whole does not contain.

3. PHENOMENON AND NOUMENON, REVISITED

Kant distinguished the *phenomenon*, the object as it appears under the forms of our sensibility, from the *noumenon*, the object as it is in itself, which may be thought but not known (Kant 1781/1787). The distinction has been interpreted in many ways, and the noumenon has often been treated as an idle posit.

Projection realism gives both terms a sharper sense. The phenomenon is the three-dimensional world of experience, the image under the projection. The noumenon is the space from which the image is taken. And the noumenon is not idle: it is known *structurally*, as the depth of the artefacts is known to Plato's released prisoner (Plato, *Republic* VII), by reconstruction from what the images cannot explain on their own. The imaginary roots, the velocity and the entangled pair are each a place where the phenomenon points beyond itself. This is a departure from Kant, who held the noumenon unknowable; it is a departure in the direction of structural realism, according to which what our best theories track is structure (Worrall 1989; Ladyman 1998).

We now ask where, in this picture, consciousness belongs.

4. THE THESIS

THE NOUMENAL THESIS. Consciousness is a product of the components of reality that the projection into three-dimensional space discards. It belongs to the noumenon, not to the phenomenon. What appears in the phenomenon is the intersection of consciousness with the projection, not consciousness itself.

The thesis does not say that consciousness is small, hidden, or too complex to find. It says that it is of the wrong kind to be found among objects in the projection, as a sphere is of the

wrong kind to be found among the figures of a plane. Abbott's *Flatland* gives the image (Abbott 1884): a sphere passing through a two-dimensional world appears to its inhabitants as a point that becomes a circle, grows, shrinks and vanishes. A Flatlander who measured the circle would measure correctly. He would not find the sphere in it, because the sphere is not a larger circle. On the noumenal thesis the brain is the circle and the mind is the sphere.

5. FIRST EXPLANANDUM: CORRELATES WITHOUT THE THING

Crick and Koch proposed in 1990 that the science of consciousness begin by seeking its neural correlates, the minimal neural activity that accompanies each conscious experience (Crick and Koch 1990). The programme has been fruitful. But its results have a characteristic form: they are always correlates. The explanatory gap (Levine 1983) and the hard problem (Chalmers 1995) name the fact that no functional or structural description of the correlates entails that they are felt. Nagel's bat makes the same point from the side of the subject: complete knowledge of the bat's sonar leaves open what it is like to be the bat (Nagel 1974).

The noumenal thesis predicts exactly this pattern. If consciousness belongs to components the projection discards, then within the projection one will find only its intersection with the projection: activity that varies lawfully with experience, as a shadow varies lawfully with its object. One will never find experience as a further object among the correlates, for the same reason that no study of the circle yields the sphere. The hard problem is hard because it asks the phenomenon to contain what it is a projection of.

6. SECOND EXPLANANDUM: OTHER MINDS AS INTENTION

We attribute minds to one another constantly and, for the most part, successfully. But what we perceive when we do so is not consciousness. It is *aboutness*: a gaze directed at something, a reach towards something, an utterance that means something. Brentano made intentionality the mark of the mental, the feature that no merely physical thing possesses (Brentano 1874); Dennett described the practice by which we attribute minds, the *intentional stance*, as the prediction of behaviour through ascribed beliefs and desires (Dennett 1987).

On the noumenal thesis these are two descriptions of one fact. Intention is the part of consciousness that is visible in the projection: its trace in three dimensions, as the trace of velocity is the motion of the hand. We never perceive another's consciousness as such, because as such it is not in the space our perception samples. We perceive the intention it casts. The phenomenon therefore has, for minds, a double sense: it is the three-dimensional world, and it is the only place in which minds meet one another, as intention.

7. THIRD EXPLANANDUM: BRAIN AND MIND AS ONE OBJECT SEEN TWICE

Bohm offered an image that bears directly on this question (Bohm 1980). A fish in a tank is filmed by two cameras at right angles, and the images are shown on two screens in another room. An observer who sees only the screens sees two fish whose movements are correlated perfectly and

instantaneously. No signal passes between them; there is one fish, projected twice. Bohm used the image for entangled particles, and went on to suggest that consciousness belongs to the higher-dimensional order of which such correlations are projections.

The noumenal thesis applies the image to brain and mind. They are not two things that interact; they are one reality, presented in the three-dimensional projection as a brain and known from within as a mind. Their correlation is perfect and unmysterious for the reason that the correlation of the two fish is: there is only one fish. The interaction problem that has troubled dualism since Elisabeth of Bohemia put it to Descartes (Shapiro 2007) does not arise, because nothing needs to pass between the two.

8. THE VIEW AMONG ITS RIVALS

Against substance dualism, the noumenal thesis posits one reality, not two substances; mind and body are two presentations of it, not two things that must be connected. *Against reductive physicalism*, it denies that consciousness is a pattern within the three-dimensional projection, and so denies that a complete description of the projection would be a complete description of the mind. *With Russellian monism* it shares a central insight: physics describes the structure and dispositions of things, not their intrinsic nature, which may be, or ground, experience (Russell 1927; Goff 2017). It differs in locating that intrinsic nature not beneath the physical structure but beyond the projection, in components that the structure of the phenomenon points to. *With Bohm* it shares the image of a higher-dimensional order projected into the explicate world; it differs in grounding the higher-dimensional order in a general account of projection that covers mathematics and kinematics as well as quantum physics.

9. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

9.1 “Adding dimensions adds only more structure”

A higher-dimensional space is still a space, and a state in it is still a structure. Why should consciousness appear there rather than here? The objection is fair, and it marks the limit of what the thesis claims. The thesis does not derive experience from dimension. It locates experience: it says that whatever consciousness is, it is not a feature of the three-dimensional projection, and that the evidence has exactly the shape this location predicts. Whether the noumenal components are experiential in themselves, as the Russellian monist holds of intrinsic natures, is a further question that the thesis leaves open.

9.2 *Unfalsifiability*

It may be said that a thesis about what cannot be observed cannot be tested. But the thesis makes claims about the phenomenon. It predicts that the neural correlates will remain correlates however refined they become; that no structural description of an artefact built within three-dimensional space will entail that the artefact is conscious; and that the evidence for other minds will remain evidence of intention. Each prediction could fail. A physicalist reduction that closed the explanatory gap would refute the thesis.

9.3 *The Kantian objection*

Kant held that the noumenon cannot be known. If consciousness belongs to it, is it not unknowable in principle? The thesis concedes that consciousness cannot be known *as an object in the projection*. It is known otherwise: from within, by each of us, and structurally, by what its projection cannot explain. That is more than Kant allowed and less than a physicalist demands.

9.4 *Solipsism*

If I know only my own consciousness from within, and others' only as intention, have I any reason to think they have it? The thesis does not worsen the traditional problem of other minds, and it offers a reason for confidence: intention is the characteristic trace of consciousness in the projection, as motion is the characteristic trace of velocity. We infer velocity from motion without seeing it; we infer mind from intention in the same way.

9.5 *The appeal to physics*

It may be objected that the argument borrows the authority of physics for a metaphysical conclusion. It does not. The physics supplies only an existence proof of the pattern: that there are cases, established independently, in which what appears as two correlated things is one thing seen twice, and in which what appears impossible is located in a further dimension. The metaphysical conclusion stands or falls on its own explanatory merits.

10. ARTIFICIAL MINDS

The thesis has a consequence for artificial intelligence. A contemporary language model is a physical system in three-dimensional space that computes, one token at a time, over a landscape fitted to human text. Everything it is belongs to the projection. If consciousness were a pattern within the projection, a sufficiently large pattern might constitute it. If, as the noumenal thesis holds, consciousness belongs to the components the projection discards, then no pattern within the projection will constitute it, however large. What such systems can exhibit is the trace of intention, borrowed from the text of those who had it; this is the part of mind that shows in three dimensions and the part that is not the mind. Searle's argument that syntax does not suffice for semantics (Searle 1980) finds here a geometric counterpart: the projection does not suffice for what it projects.

11. CONCLUSION

I have argued that projection realism gives Kant's noumenon a determinate sense, and that consciousness belongs to it. The thesis explains why consciousness is always found as correlates and never as an object, why other minds appear only as intention, and why brain and mind correlate perfectly without interacting. It is not dualism, for it posits one reality; it is not reductive physicalism, for it denies that the projection exhausts that reality. It is a thesis about where the mind is, and its answer is that the mind is not in the shadow.

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