

## Consciousness and Human Identity

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by David Lorimer

This conference was a follow-up to one organised by JOHN CORNWELL in 1992 on reductionism, the substance of which recently appeared in a book entitled *Nature's Imagination*. It is a measure of the burgeoning interest in consciousness studies that this meeting took place in Cambridge only a fortnight after our own conference at St. John's. When I first heard from John about his conference, it occurred to me that our meeting might also have been entitled 'Consciousness and Human Identity' since it too addressed the fundamental question of who we are. Speakers at Jesus came from a variety of disciplines - neuroscience, psychology, philosophy and theology. In considering the spectrum of approaches to the subject at both meetings, there was more on the neuroscience end at Jesus and more at the spiritual/parapsychological end at St. John's. Indeed, parapsychology was not represented at Jesus, while the emphasis on Christian theology contrasted somewhat with the broader spiritual and transpersonal themes at St. John's. JOHN SEARLE's psychological does not extend as far into the unknown as those of STANISLAV GROF and CHARLES TART.

The core of the topic was most directly addressed by John Cornwell himself and by Professor STEVEN ROSE from the Open University. John reported on the recent Eli Lilly trial in the USA involving a man taking a course of Prozac who had run riot and killed over a dozen people. The action brought against the company argued that the drug was principally responsible for the man's criminal action. Eli Lilly were naturally anxious to prove the opposite case - namely that the real causes of his behaviour lay in 'nature and nurture'. The reader will observe that the issue as formulated is of the relative causal power of various forms of determinism: neural, genetic, biochemical, social and cultural - of which more anon. Prozac itself has been marketed as a 'happiness pill' with 'transforming powers' and acts on the serotonin uptake in the brain in very specific ways. It is only one step further to claim that this kind of drug can define and procure psychological well-being and that the soul is simply a collection of cells.

In the emerging computer-based terminology of neuropsychopharmacology, human identity is essentially the chemical software in the brain. This software may well get scrambled but it can be rewritten or even over-written by a drug. Thus Eli Lilly argues that the programme written by genes and culture overcame even the normally virus-proof Prozac re-write; in other words the original programme was 're-write protected'. The company eventually won the case, but the verdict is now being scrutinised, especially in view of payments being made to all but two of the possible 320 expert witnesses in the case - the issue is complicated by the fact that the payments were made for the people in question to read the 400 depositions obtained to support the company's case.

The central issue is one of causality and hence determinism: can one assume that neurochemical changes actually determine behaviour without bringing in other possible causal factors? This very question was considered at the 1993 *May* Dialogue by Dr. PETER FENWICK and Professor ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH and formed one of the central themes of the recent meeting on free will at the Institute of Psychiatry in London, which will be fully reported in our next issue. Professor Steven Rose's talk was based on his *Nature* article on Neurogenetic Determinism from 2 February 1995. He opposed the division of causal factors

into mutually exclusive biological and social categories, arguing that one must 'seek the appropriate level that effectively determines outcomes' instead of presuming that the reductionist biological account can provide all the answers. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this position would suggest that we should 'seek the origins of the Bosnian war in deficiencies in the serotonin-reuptake mechanisms in Dr. Karadzic's brain'! Neurogenetic determinism argues for a directly causal relationship between gene and behaviour and fuels the research programme to discover genes for depression and violence. He eloquently spelled out his objections to this position in considerable detail, showing how it can lead to the misplaced sense of causality illustrated above. It also encourages a linear view of living processes which does not allow for developmental plasticity and adaptation on the part of the organism. The root of this, he contended, was the unfortunate separation of the disciplines of genetics and developmental biology at the turn of the century.

Underlying this kind of debate, I think, is a misapprehension of the relationship between time and free will. Scientific determinism has its ancestry in the notion of an orderly universe subject to law, as well as in the predestination implied in divine omniscience and omnipotence - a topic which exercised theologians for many centuries and is still informs contemporary debates on theodicy. Bergson points out the asymmetry of past and future in relation to free will in his book *Creative Evolution*. When something has already happened, it is easy to construct a deterministic sequence of events which makes it look as if the event in question was absolutely inevitable: this is exactly the process undertaken by both sides in the Eli Lilly trial.

David Griffin has pointed out that the deterministic picture arises from a scientific preoccupation with efficient causality, which was only one of the four forms enunciated by Aristotle. Concentrating on answering the question 'how' rather than why, its models postulate mechanical push from the past and bottom-up causation along the lines criticised by Steven Rose above. It explains phenomena from the outside in, advocating an understanding through an objective third-person perspective. A complementary view begins from the subjective, first-person perspective which recognises the validity of final causation - a pull from the future which allows free choice, and therefore responsibility, in the present moment. The common sense experience of free will need not in this view be denied, nor is the scientific explanation regarded as the final word.

Dr. MARY MIDGLEY contested the view that there is only one 'real map' of reality, offering the helpful geographical image of different maps designed to illustrate the various features of relief, rainfall, population etc. She also warned against mistaking subjects for objects and referred to the two perspectives I discussed above in terms of deterministic and active languages. Professor John Searle, in a brilliant and vigorous exposition of a series of contemporary misapprehensions, reminded us that these languages refer to the same system, and elucidated his version of the causal story of consciousness. He contended that qualia really exist as conscious states and suggested that consciousness is perhaps an emergent phenomenon like liquidity.

In his summary of the conference proceedings, Dr. PETER LIPTON of the History and Philosophy of Science Department showed how many of the speakers had been considering various accounts of the mind-brain question in terms of correlation, causation and identity. He questioned whether the identity claim was intelligible and warned against confusing claims with evidence for those same claims. Explanations, he argued needed to focus on a multiplicity of often complex factors, using as an example the many answers one could give

to the question 'Why did someone rob a bank?' It is important to be aware of exactly what is being explained, how it is being made intelligible, and what kind of understanding is attained. Consciousness and Human Identity? There are surely more questions that answers - so the exploration will continue unabated and we can look forward to similar stimulating and congenial meetings.