BOOK REVIEW

Christopher S. Hill, *Consciousness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

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Received: 14.04.2011; Accepted: 28.06.2011

Abstract: Christopher S. Hill advances a theory of conscious experience that employs the idea of representation to unify and explain a wide range of subjective phenomena, including emotions and pain. The theory shows the relevance of philosophical thought in a multidisciplinary view of the mind.

Keywords: Representation. *Qualia*. Perception. Awareness

The view that conscious experiences are baffling phenomena of a metaphysically peculiar nature dies hard. Although scientific models of conscious awareness have in recent years been receiving more and more attention, such theories have yet to find room in the imagination of intellectuals. So the fact that scientists have already developed rigorous explanations of phenomena ranging from intentional action to visual perception has, unfortunately for those of physicalist inclinations,

* The author would like to thank Professors Christopher S. Hill, Oswaldo Chateaubriand and Marco Ruffino.

failed to capture public imagination. Can philosophers help the physicalist cause?

It is ironic that, in contemporary philosophy of mind, much important work on consciousness shows no distinct philosophical character, at least in the following sense: the positive theoretical contributions could just as well have been made by scientists. The refutations of dualist arguments involving *qualia* naturally require a firm grasp of contemporary philosophy, but they are evidently not what I mean by "positive theoretical contributions", that is, actually explaining the data. Think, for example, of Daniel C. Dennett's (1991, pp. 101-170) ingenious reinterpretations of the color *phi* experiment and Libet's "timing of consciousness" puzzle, or of Paul Churchland's (2002) work in praise of recurrent networks. Fascinating as they are, such ideas are hardly convincing to those skeptical about a major role for philosophy in the development of a naturalistic/physicalist perspective on the mind that is both comprehensive and rigorous.

What would such a philosophical view look like? One might try to develop a theory that, in addition to the mandatory tapping into recent empirical research, incorporates careful introspective and philosophical argument in figuring out just what the objects of experience are. Christopher S. Hill, a professor of philosophy at Brown University and a logician of distinction (he is the author of *Thought and world: an austere portrayal of truth, reference and semantic correspondence*) has set out to do just that. Initially a proponent of type materialism and conceptual dualism, a combo defended on his 1991 book *Sensations*, he evolved into a representationalist about conscious phenomena. The latter is the view defended on his latest book, *Consciousness*.

A key idea on Hill's theory is approaching qualitative states as states of the external objects of perception or properties of bodily states. Following Gilbert Harman's lead, Hill argues that awareness of *qualia* is not awareness of characteristics belonging to mental objects

per se; instead, awareness of *qualia* is awareness of properties of intentional objects. Perceptual experience typically involves representing these properties in a transparent way, that is, the properties of the representations themselves are not readily available, unlike the properties of objects that we perceive. This can be justified by an appeal to introspection. As Hill says "It is introspection that shows that our awareness of external objects is not mediated by awareness of internal phenomena, and it is introspection which shows that introspection reveals only the representational properties of experiences" (pp.58-59). When we focus our attention on our visual experience of a given object, for example, we get better detailing of a feature belonging to the object – the brightness of its colors, its mereological relations, and so on. Thus, the most promising approach is a focus on the conscious mind as a representational engine. Moreover, the success of contemporary cognitive science demands just such an approach (p. 70). Indeed, scientific work in both "high level cognitive phenomena" and "lower level perceptual phenomena" presuppose this; Hill is thus led to affirm that scientific developments are the primary argument for the representationalist thesis (ibid.).

Unfortunately for proponents of such a view, there seem to be features of subjective experiences that just can`t be intrinsic to the discriminated objects. When a huge object such as The Moon is seen, for example, we have something that (from the viewpoint of average earthlings) *looks* rather small, even though it is perception *of* something enormous. So it appears that in conscious perception we are aware of at least some properties that are tied to a subjective situation, and this subjectivity might very well imply an "internal" character. This is what Hill calls "the problem of appearances" (pp.59-62).

How could those sympathetic to Harman's view cope with the problem of appearances? Hill believes that such appearances, which he calls "A-properties" (p. 144) are indeed possessed exclusively by the

objects of experience, but have a viewpoint-dependent nature. Thus, A-properties are relative to "such contextual factors as distance, angle of view, and lighting" (think of objects with the same light-reflecting properties all over but partially covered in shade: again, we have a grasp of something of a certain color all over but looking different here and there). These considerations set the stage for a Hill's theory of visual *qualia*, which are to be identified with A-properties. The *qualia* involved in bodily sensations differ from the visual ones in not being viewpoint-dependent in this sense, but nevertheless share the crucial feature of not being mental in character. They are properties represented *in* awareness, not properties *of* awareness. This representational view extends to all *qualia*; indeed, even awareness of emotions is such a perceptual phenomenon.

An interesting consequence is the possibility of us being wrong even about our own experiences. In other words, incorrigibility about one`s own sensations gets discarded. Since in perception there is always an appearance/reality distinction, one could be thinking they're outraged when actually experiencing a different emotion, such as jealousy. Likewise, you might think you are in pain when you are in fact hallucinating pain (p. 181). But *Consciousness*' main strength is not the demolition of old intuitions of incorrigibility. It is rather the extension of Harman's introspective insights into a theory of consciousness that is both comprehensive and detailed. The representational perspective allows Hill to tackle the seemingly ineffable realms of pain and emotion as deeply as it has ever been done in philosophy.

Indeed, as surprising as it may sound to those who see awareness of pain as awareness of an intrinsically subjective mental property, pains fit rather smoothly in the representational picture defended by Hill. Here are his arguments: awareness of pain closely resembles straightforward examples of perception. We are able to attend to pains and thus to intensify the contrast between pains and what is in "the

background". We can assign spatial characteristics to pains, such as location. We can assign "parts" to pains, and we also have particularized access to them (as Hill puts it, "if I am aware of the existence of a trio of pains in my arm, I must be aware of each individual member of the trio"). These facts, coupled with the assumptions that experiencing pain also involves subconceptual representations, a priori norms of grouping into wholes and a proprietary phenomenology, strongly suggest that awareness of pain is a form of perception. The objects perceived turn out to be bodily disturbances that involve actual or potential tissue damage (p.177). This means that being aware of pain *qualia* means representing bodily disturbances. In Hill's theory, pains are to be identified with such disturbances. A-properties are not mental after all, and neither are pains. And since representation involves the possibility of misrepresenting, we can hallucinate pains. That is the case in cases of phantom limb pain. Patients who present this condition don`t really have pain (p.182).

In the case of emotions, Hill explores the somatic view first proposed by William James in 1884. In a nutshell, the somatic approach says that emotions consist entirely of awareness of bodily changes triggered by biologically significant events. When one's relative is hurt, for example, their body is guided by instinct to react in a certain way, often with crying, the usual modifications in body language, gesturing and a peculiar pace in the flow of thoughts. The agent's emotional sensations are nothing more than awareness of these changes. Indeed, as James argued, it is difficult to conceive of emotions in the absence of such awareness. A point in favor of the somatic theory is its predictive power: researchers have verified that involuntary grimacing modifies mood. Another point in favor of the somatic approach is its refutable character. Should one find out that spinal patients (whose awareness of bodily changes is impaired) have the exact same emotional profile

(given the same background conditions) of those without spinal injuries, the theory would be in serious trouble. Fortunately for Hill and other proponents of the somatic approach (Portuguese neuroscientist Antonio Damasio is an example), it seems spinal patients do have somewhat different emotional profiles (p. 199). For these reasons, it seems reasonable to conceive of emotional sensations as representations of bodily reactions.

But how can such a theory account for the fact that emotions don't seem to be about bodily events, but about whatever triggers the events in the first place? If I grieve, it appears to me that the grief is "directed" at the loss I have had, and not about my somatic reactions to the event. Hill's contribution here is to complement the previous somatic theories with loops of perceptual imagery "that provides an emotion with its intentional object" (p. 207). Thus, a major obstacle to the somatic approach can be negotiated smoothly.

Sympathetic though this review is, it must be said that the way Hill uses the term "qualia" can be misleading. Hill is faithful to the idea that perceptual *qualia* are, as Jaegwon Kim says, "the ways that things look, seem, and appear to conscious observers" (p.145). This is perfectly compatible with the account described above, but there is more to it than just that. The term "qualia" carries a deeper significance in philosophical discourse; "the way things look, seem and appear to conscious observers" is usually seen as characterizing *mental* states. Moreover, this characterization is said to be irreducible. "Qualia" is then used as a crucial theoretical term that states one's position concerning reduction/elimination. The very deflated *qualia* mentioned by Hill, on the other hand, could just as well be accepted by *qualia* eliminativists. After all, who would deny that there are ways things look and appear to those who are conscious? Eliminativists have basically been saying that there is nothing irreducibly mental in consciousness. In other words, there is no felt quality that is immune to physicalist

theorizing/reduction. For this reason, I feel Hill ought to stick to a more neutral term such as "appearances", and assume a *qualia*-eliminativist position. His very bland definition of *qualia* has no theoretical bite.

Another minor flaw on *Consciousness* is Hill's confusing treatment of the folk concept of pain. He alleges that the bodily disturbance theory of pain cannot do justice to the incorrigible and intrinsically experiential character of the folk concept. Unfortunately, the latter simply cannot be abandoned, for the folk concept is used to keep track of painful experiences, and this matters a great deal. As a result, we ought to say pain is *either* the sort of *experience* we have when certain somatosensory representations are activated (the folk concept) or a bodily disturbance we can be aware of (the representational theory). But is this warranted? Everything in folk psychology is used to keep track of important things, but it would be naïve to expect all of its concepts to be preserved by advanced theorizing. The concept of images seen in one's mind's eye, for example, appears to be bankrupt even if it is used to keep track of something quite relevant, namely, visual imagination. Likewise, we shouldn't expect a philosophical theory of pain to fully honor the folk conception of pain.

Minor complaints aside, *Consciousness* helps to clarify the issues like few other books in the field. It stands out for comprehensiveness – key concepts are employed in unifying aspects of consciousness that appear very dissimilar. More importantly, though, it incorporates scientific insight without letting scientists do all the relevant work. Philosophy still has important things to say about the human mind.

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