

Introduction

The problem of consciousness is arguably the central problem in the philosophy of mind, and the interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies is rapidly emerging as the space wherein neuroscientists, computer scientists, cognitive scientists, psychologists, and philosophers collectively investigate the phenomenon of conscious experience. Unfortunately, the history of philosophy has not fared so well among this prestigious group of researchers. It is a dogma in the philosophy of mind that the systematic investigation of consciousness began in the seventeenth century with René Descartes and that previous philosophers either were unconcerned with consciousness or lacked the linguistic and conceptual tools to explain consciousness, or did not mean what “we” mean by consciousness.

An example of this can be found in the opening lines of the introductory chapter to *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*: “[t]he attempt to develop a systematic approach to the study of consciousness begins with René Descartes (1595–1650) and his ideas still have a major influence today” (Frith and Rees 2007: 9). This introductory chapter attributes the origin of consciousness studies to Descartes on the grounds that he is the first philosopher to distinguish between mind and body, to locate consciousness in the mind, and to think seriously about the neural correlates of consciousness. Furthermore, it claims that Descartes provides the framework within which consciousness studies have developed in the past several hundred years. The purpose of this book is to dispel this dogma by examining the theory of consciousness belonging to the late ancient Greek philosopher Plotinus.

Modern scholars regard Plotinus as the founder of Neoplatonism. Although he considered himself an interpreter of Plato, his unique synthesis of Pythagorean, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic thought introduced the framework for the emergence of a new phase of Platonism in late antiquity. Beginning with Plotinus in the mid-third century CE and ending a generation after the closure of the Platonic Academy in Athens

in the early-sixth century CE, Neoplatonism had become the dominant school of philosophy throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

My reason for studying Plotinus' theory of consciousness is both historical and philosophical. The assumption that Descartes is the first philosopher to investigate consciousness has become so matter-of-fact that it has prevented us from noticing the achievement of late ancient philosophy of mind, and it has narrowed our conception of what consciousness is, and what it is for. My concern is to show that Plotinus prefigures Descartes in developing a theory of consciousness. Recognition of this permits us to analyze the phenomenon of consciousness from a perspective outside the Cartesian framework and enables us to clarify the concept of consciousness we have inherited from the post-Cartesian tradition.

The framework I have in mind is what is sometimes called the "Inner Theatre" or "Cartesian Theatre" model of consciousness. According to this model, the mind perceives its mental states in the way an observer perceives actors on a stage. In the case of the theater, there exists an observer that watches actors enter and exit the stage. In the case of the mind, there exists a self that observes its thoughts (*cogitatio*) in a kind of internal theater. Thoughts that make it onto the stage are conscious, thoughts that do not make it onto the stage are unconscious. The key features of this model are that the internal theater is one's own subjective experience and that we have a unique epistemic authority over the contents of our subjective experience. The advantage to studying Plotinus is that he offers a significantly richer model of consciousness than this model.

Plotinus holds (in modern parlance) a dualist theory of consciousness. In the most general sense, a dualist theory of consciousness claims that at least some aspects of consciousness fall outside the realm of the physical. As a late ancient Platonist, Plotinus makes the stronger claim that all aspects of consciousness fall outside the realm of the physical. Plotinus agrees with Descartes that consciousness inheres only in minds (or mental states) and cannot be reduced to bodies (or bodily states). However, he does not agree with the post-Cartesian tradition that mental states are transparent, infallible, incorrigible, or take place in something like a private, inner theater. The inner space of the Plotinian soul is a place very different from the inner space of the Cartesian mind.

The key feature of Plotinus' theory is that it involves multiple layers of experience: different layers of consciousness occur in different levels of self. The first layer takes place in the *physical* self, which is the subject of affections in the sensible world. It constitutes the body as a subject and provides us with ownership of our bodily and psychic activities. The second layer takes place in the *dianoetic* self, which is the subject of imagination and discursive reasoning in the sensible world. It provides us

with apprehension of our bodily affections and our intentional activities, such as sense-perception, discursive reasonings, and thoughts. The third layer takes place in the *noetic* self, which is the subject of contemplation in the intelligible world. It provides us with awareness of our contemplative activity, integrates us into the intelligible world, and unites us with the divine intellect. The layering of higher modes of consciousness on lower ones provides the human being with a rich experiential world.

I regard the layeredness of Plotinus' theory of consciousness as its chief strength. Switching into contemporary terminology for a moment, it shows that to understand a conscious mental state one needs to understand more than a physical substrate (say, neural correlates) or a cognitive mechanism (say, a Turing machine that can perform computations). Rather, one needs to understand the entire cognitive architecture of the mind, and that in order to understand a given cognitive activity one needs to take into account the lower layers of consciousness that it is completing and the higher layers of consciousness that it is drawing on for its own completion. For Plotinus, this means taking into account not only the higher layers of consciousness within our own soul, but also those contained in divine souls (soul of the earth, soul of the planets and stars, and the soul of the world) and in the hypostases or principles of reality (Soul, Intellect, and the One). A modern reader may have little patience for divine souls and hypostases, but they are part of Plotinus' explanatory system and his theory of consciousness is unintelligible without them. I will have much to say about these other entities as they relate to consciousness, especially Intellect.

Consciousness is widely distributed throughout Plotinus' ontology. It occurs in Nature, animals, human beings, divine souls, and the hypostases. The basis for this pan-psychism is his theory of contemplation, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 5. Suffice it to say for now that Plotinus regards Intellect as the paradigmatic form of life and thought. As a paradigm, Intellect stands in a model–image relation to all forms of life and thought, from Soul down to plants. This model–image relation is an adaptation of Plato's theory of Forms. In Plato's metaphysics sensible individuals acquire properties by “participating” or “sharing” in the sources of those properties, the Forms. A metaphor that Plato often uses to describe participation is that sensibles are like images and the Forms are like patterns (*paradeigmata*) on which the images are modeled.¹ For example, a citizen of *kallipolis* becomes just by sharing in the form of

¹ The model–image metaphor occurs frequently throughout the Platonic dialogues. For example, see *Republic* 484c6–d2, *Parmenides* 132c12–d4, and *Timaeus* 29b1–4. Compare with *Phaedo* 74a–75a for the idea that properties in sensible individuals strive to be like the Forms.

Justice and modeling his soul on Justice itself.² As the model, then, all forms of life and thought are ultimately images of Intellect's contemplation and strive to contemplate in the manner of Intellect. Since Intellect's contemplation essentially involves consciousness, the model-image relation also extends to consciousness. Hence, all living beings with the possible exception of plants have some form of consciousness. However, as we might expect from the diversity of living beings, different kinds of entities have different degrees of the same type of consciousness, and different types of consciousness.

The Structure of the Book

The book contains six chapters plus an appendix, and is organized around the core chapters concerned with consciousness (Chapters 3 through 5). In Chapter 1, I discuss the self. Central to my argument in this chapter is that there are three levels of self and that the highest level is an intellect in the intelligible world. It has become commonplace in secondary literature on Plotinus to note a distinction between the soul-trace that informs the body, the lower soul that cares for the body, and the higher soul that remains in the intelligible world. Despite the recognition that three phases of soul constitute a human being, many scholars are still wedded to a dualistic structure of selfhood, according to which a human being is composed of a higher and a lower self corresponding to a higher and lower soul. However, if we adhere to this conception, we collapse two layers of consciousness and blur together different activities that are layered on top of each other. To understand the nature and role of consciousness, we must divide the lower self in two and regard the soul-trace that animates the body as a level of self in its own right.

Since our intellect comes into unity with Intellect in the recovery of our true self, I spend the bulk of this chapter explaining individuation. Drawing on IV.4.1 I argue that intellects have a perspective or point of view on the intelligible world, which individuates them from one another and Intellect. Connecting with the science-theorem analogy in IV.3.2 and VI.2.20, I argue that having a perspective individuates our intellects from one another similar to the way that theorems or specific sciences are individuated from one another in the soul of the scientist. Importantly, having a perspective not only individuates our intellect, but also highlights

² See *Republic* 472bc, 484d, 500b, and 585c.

a key difference between how our intellects contemplate the Forms and how Intellect does.

In Chapter 2 and the Appendix, I discuss the consciousness terms (*antilêpsis*, *parakolouthêsis*, *sunaisthêsis*, and *sunesis*). Central to my interpretation of Plotinus is that he uses different terms to refer to different modes of consciousness and, in particular, that *antilêpsis* is a bona fide consciousness term that picks out a unique mode of consciousness. In Chapter 2, I explain how Plotinus uses each of these terms, and I propose a translation scheme to capture their unique meanings. In the Appendix, I give a brief semantic history of the development of these terms from the time of Homer to Plotinus.

In the core chapters, I discuss consciousness. Central to my argument is that each layer of consciousness has unique capacities, that the higher the layer the more unifying the capacity, and that the more unifying the capacity the closer together are thought and being. The first layer unifies the qualified body into a structured and coherent whole, which enables it to function as a unity despite being composed of a multitude of parts. The second layer unifies the lower soul with the *logoi* present within it, which enables it to dissolve the duality inherent in discursive reasoning between reasoning subject and object reasoned-about, or reasoning subject and external action performed. The third layer unites the higher soul with Intellect, which enables it to return to a state of identity with Intellect and the intelligibles. The turn inward and ascent upward culminates in this layer of consciousness, which enables us to assimilate to the rationality of Intellect and the self-sufficiency of the One. Unity is the governing principle in Plotinus' theory. The more unified we are, the less we are in need of being completed by things that are external to ourselves and beyond our control. The inward turn and upward ascent is expressed vividly in the cover illustration, "Head of a Young Man," 400–420.

In Chapter 6, I discuss self-determination. I argue that in order to be free, in a world governed by destiny, we must establish right reason in charge of our embodied lives and be the sole efficient causal source of our actions. This involves living according to a higher code of laws derived from the intelligible world and obtaining the premises for our actions from Intellect. Central to my argument is that to be self-determining we must become consciously aware of our intellects, and the freedom and authority belonging to our intellects. Consciousness thus plays a critical role in Plotinus' theory of agency. I conclude with this chapter to bring together Plotinus' theoretical and practical philosophy and to illustrate the central role that consciousness plays in Plotinus' writings.