Speculation on
Consciousness as Relative Existence

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A speculation which arose within the context of the nature of the Bit-string Combinatorial
Hierarchy is offered for discussion. It seems to provide a strong clue to how systems
must be constructed if they are to support consciousness. It depends on regarding consciousness
as a case of ‘relative existence’. So that:
‘A is conscious of x’ becomes: ‘x exists for A’.

1. Constructing systems that are to support consciousness

I would like to put up the following speculation for further discussion. Its origins go
back to conversations I had with the late Ted Bastin [1], a physicist, and the late
Dorothy Emmet [2], a philosopher and subsequent conversations with Pierre Noyes
and others.

‘Relative existence’ or ‘existence{to’ comes from re-thinking the basis of physics
approximately along the process ideas of A. N. Whitehead [3]. I don't think much
progress can be made on the ‘hard problem’ of how it is that there is experience at
all, without re-interpreting physics.

This involves deleting ‘absolute objective existence’ from our vocabulary while
satisfying our conviction that the world is real and connected, by envisaging it as
a flux of pure activity which is non-substantial in its essence -- more like energy
than traditional matter.

We then have to imagine that spatial extension and material particles are produced
by acts, within which they have only a relative (and transitory) ‘existence to’
each other but no absolute existence. This is not consciousness, but it is the germ
within ‘matter’ that makes it possible for ‘mind’ to arise -- for systems to be
conscious -- for something to ‘exist for’ them.

The progression from this bare, undifferentiated, transitory ‘relative existence’ of
a particle within the simplest quantum act, to all the richness of human consciousness,
involves an entropic principle such that when the ‘spontaneous’ interactions
between the parts of a system becomes constant (or constantly repetitive), the ‘relative
existence’ of the parts to one another is neutralised or habituated, such that
the formerly separate ‘experiencing’ of the parts merge into a unified experiencing
activity directed outwards.

If this view is sound, it would follow that conscious entities have to be constructed
in such a way as to take advantage of, or ‘concentrate’ relative existence
in this way.

This would rule out the possibility that ‘functionally equivalent' systems of
silicon chips could support consciousness, because the processing that goes on in
them does not have an intimate relation to underlying physical processes. However
it does raise the intriguing question of what substances and/or states of matter
might be suitable.

It seems to me that present understanding in this area is rather like the state
of electromagnetism before the discovery of the electric current and the work of
Faraday and Maxwell. The principle described here at least provides a ‘handle’ on
how conscious devices should be made, which the purely behaviourist Turing test
does not.
One can envisage devices manifesting species of 'relative existence' that are not much like consciousness. I doubt that the essence of consciousness has anything to do with intelligence -- artificial or otherwise, though clearly some such appended means of communicating is necessary.

2. 'Existence-for-others' and how Dualism arises

Knowledge of physics (indeed all science) starts with experience and gives results which have meaning in further experiences. But it is exactly the having of experience that consciousness is about. Our concepts of what we mean by 'exist' and 'real' are also derived from experience via centuries of thought that may have gone astray and may now need revision. So the 'hard problem' of consciousness is intimately bound up with our ontological conceptions of the nature of the world and our place in it. (Schopenhauer's 'world knot').

Since we have been conditioned to a dualistic way of thinking by centuries of use, the way out is intricate and delicate. Because it is delicate, it requires sensitivity. I have coined the term relative existence to evoke a fresh return to observation of how we find the world to be in our experience.

Descartes' 'cogito' strikes me as contrived -- not least because he was adult. Babies do not pop into life, look around, conclude 'I think, therefore I am', then proceed to ruminate on whether some of the objects around them are conscious beings like themselves.

From evidence of maternal deprivation, 'wolf boys', etc., it looks as if consciousness is not entirely an innate property of brains, but largely a product of interaction with others. Evidence from solitary confinement, etc., suggests that interaction may even be needed to sustain consciousness.

If this is so, solipsism could not arise. For if human consciousness, unlike simple awareness, is a product of interaction between people, then the world must come to exist for us in infancy as a shared experience, and is public from the very start.

To regain an accurate ontological foundation for the sciences I think we have to look very carefully at the kind of existence things have for us in direct experience, including early experiences, and how we have proceeded from there to where our scientific conceptions are today.

My own suggestion is that things as experienced are not primarily felt to exist 'in themselves' nor 'for me'. This comes later. Rather the mode of existence things have as experienced, might suitably be called 'existence for others' or 'existence to others'. This does not mean that we have other people's experiences, but we do spend a lot of time imagining how other people see things. This gives those things what some might call an 'overlay of meaning', and others might regard as essential.

Either way it is a type of existence that is neither objective nor subjective in its primary immediacy. It may be seen as subsuming both as special cases which have grown out of it:

First, 'existence-in-itself' may be seen as that special case of primary 'existence for others' where the 'other' in question is replaced initially by a supreme other, an all-knowing God, and later by His secular carbon-copy: the C19 'impartial objective observer'. Either of these bestows upon everyday things an 'existence feel' which is different from the purely personal one out of which awareness grew in the first place. Nothing else in experience (itself an activity) suggests the concept of absolute existence, or the need for it.

Second, subjective 'existence for me' arises from the 'for others' kind only after appropriate socialisation of the individual (not the same in all cultures).
If, as seems to me, a fresh and careful phenomenological analysis of experience more or less deconstructs the concept of 'absolute objective existence', then we have to find another way to satisfy our conviction that the world is real and enduring.

Are there serious conceptual difficulties in rethinking the physical world as essentially 'process' rather than 'existence' -- along the lines of A. N. Whitehead, William James, etc., with the benefit of more experimental data than they had? For if we can so rethink, then the conceptual scheme described would embrace consciousness in an uncontrived and natural way.

To what extent would we be guilty of anthropomorphism (and does it matter) if we project onto nature the idea that the relative existence of one thing to another can occur within fundamental physical processes?

After all we can't have it both ways: either we want to have a 'property of 'matter' " that allows consciousness to arise from it, or not.

I suspect that if we don't put it in, we don't get it out. Evidently it is in there since we ourselves are conscious.

3. Summary

According to the conceptual scheme outlined above, inasmuch as a conscious subject is not an object (but in some sense its opposite) no amount of signal processing complexity in an artificial brain object can ever make it happen that there is something that exists 'for' that brain object, however it may behave or whatever it may report, unless the natural 'relative existence' inherent in physical processes is used and made to 'concentrate' in some sense.

These ideas provide a guideline to work to, where we now have none, except for a semi-magical belief that by imitating perceptual mechanisms somehow, complexity alone will one day convert objects into subjects.

References