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REDUCTIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS. FROM HUSSERL TO CHURCHLAND

Abstract. The author juxtaposes two extreme approaches to the relationship between consciousness and the physical world: phenomenological-idealistic (represented by Edmund Husserl) and radically naturalistic (represented by Paul Churchland). These two positions are interpreted in terms of opposite if symmetrical types of reduction (on the one hand, the reduction of the world to a sense for consciousness, and on the other hand, the reduction of consciousness to an element of the physical world). They emerge as two ways of abstracting from the ambivalence of ordinary experience, in which consciousness and the physical world are both mutually entangled and non-identical with each other. In conclusion, the author argues that contemporary philosophy, which follows both the idealistic and the naturalistic path, fails to solve the problem of this relationship.

Keywords: phenomenology, idealism, naturalism, reduction, consciousness.

The thing, which must be determined independently of our freedom and to which our knowledge must conform, and *the intelligence*, which must know, are in experience inseparably connected. The philosopher can leave one of the two out of consideration, and he has then abstracted from experience and raised himself above it. If he leaves out the former, he retains an intelligence in itself [...]; if he leaves out the latter, he retains a thing-in-itself, that is, abstracted from the fact that it occurs in experience, as a similar basis of explanation. The first method of procedure is called *idealism*, the second *dogmatism*. [...] Neither of these two systems can directly refute its opposite, for their quarrel is about the first principle, which admits of no derivation from anything beyond it...

J. G. Fichte, "First Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge", § 3–5

1. Introduction

The expression "reductions of consciousness" mentioned in the title of this paper is voluntarily ambiguous. It constitutes an elliptical form of two expressions with, at the first glance, opposite meanings. On the one hand,

there are reductions in which consciousness is a logical subject, i.e. reductions performed by consciousness; on the other hand, there are reductions in which consciousness is a logical and grammatical object, i.e. reductions to which it is – or can be – subjected. Still, as I will try to point out, there is a common denominator, or a formal analogy, between the two, which consists in “suspending,” putting aside, one of the moments of a complex whole, in focusing only on one side of what is given as “mixed” in “natural experience”. One can argue that both kinds of reduction are, after all, operated by consciousness. Nevertheless, the vectors of reduction remain opposite. Analogous in their form, the two kinds of reduction differ in their content, direction, and effects.

Fichte’s reasoning quoted at the beginning provides the leading thread of the reflections below. In this reasoning, one may easily distinguish several constitutive moments, which I shall discuss below.

- (1) “*The thing*, which must be determined independently of our freedom and to which our knowledge must conform, and *the intelligence*, which must know, are in experience inseparably connected” (Fichte, 1982, p. 8).

Experience – that is to say, ordinary experience – is synthetic, as it involves both the “thing” and the “intelligence” (which, in this case, can be equated with consciousness or conscious subjectivity). At the same time, the experience in question – as Fichte seems to assume, although he does not make it explicit – is the experience of a certain tension between the “thing” and the “intelligence.” For the “inseparable connection” of the two is clearly not their identity. On the contrary, it is a connection of two different, or even contrary, elements since the first is “determined independently of our freedom,” while the determination of the second is precisely “freedom.” (It is pointless to discuss here what is freedom; rather, let us assume that, at its lowest level, it is tantamount to the sense of difference between thinking or being conscious of a thing and the thing itself.) Consequently, what is given in ordinary, pre-philosophical experience is both a mutual entanglement of consciousness and things and their separation from each other.

Going beyond the quoted text, one may contend that the difference between consciousness and things is experienced in self-consciousness, which appears together with our consciousness of things, and even more so in reflection on such consciousness. We experience it, in particular, through reflection on the subjective perspective from which we view things and which often leads to misunderstandings or even manifests itself as uncertainty,

a question, or doubt. In ordinary, although already reflective experience, things appear to be problematic; and it is precisely this problematic character that marks their essential difference from a consciousness which experiences them in a certain way, which seeks to gain knowledge about them, but which can be mistaken and called into question. In short, the common experience of the relationship between consciousness and the world of things is essentially ambiguous: it is synthetic, but also dualistic, for the synthesis in question occurs and breaks down at the same time, never being truly accomplished. The more reflective consciousness is, the more clearly it perceives its specificity and the difference between itself and the world to which it refers and with which it is “inseparably connected.”

- (2) “The philosopher can leave one of the two out of consideration, and he has then abstracted from experience and raised himself above it” (Fichte, 1982, p. 8).

Insofar as philosophy is a domain of abstract thinking, it goes beyond ordinary experience: especially, it exceeds the particular ambivalence or ambiguity of such experience, searching for explanations which are both general and possibly univocal. In this sense – as Hegel strongly emphasized, but it already follows from Fichte’s thought – abstracting is a synonym of one-sided thinking. Abstracting or abstract thinking therefore is reductive. In what follows I shall employ the concept of reduction in this most general (or abstract) sense: as an abstraction which dismisses the ambivalence of ordinary experience and seeks to exceed it toward the “univocal.” Regardless of particular variations and degrees of reduction that one may distinguish, the common denominator of all of them is the dissent for ambivalence and the aspiration to overcome or dissolve it in a possibly coherent system, which, if unattainable on an epistemic level, is at least postulated as an ontological truth. Reduction thus understood means not so much reducing a complex whole into simple particles but reducing it into one principle, in suspending the opposite one.

- (3) “If he leaves out the former, he retains an intelligence in itself [...]; if he leaves out the latter, he retains a thing-in-itself, that is, abstracted from the fact that it occurs in experience, as a similar basis of explanation. The first method of procedure is called idealism, the second dogmatism” (Fichte, 1982, p. 8).

What is particularly interesting about this passage is that it presents reduction in the general sense proposed above as a common denominator of

the two traditionally opposite metaphysical positions, namely – idealism and naturalism (which Fichte calls “dogmatism”). From this viewpoint, the two positions, or “systems,” are as contradictory as they are symmetrical in their abstract character. The only, though fundamental, difference between them lies in the direction in which they perform reduction. While idealism sees consciousness as *the subject* of reduction – it is consciousness that reduces the world of things to itself – naturalism makes it *the object* of reduction by reducing it, at least declaratively, to things (or, to put it in more scientific terms, to a system of basic particles governed by the fundamental laws of physics). The particular sense or degree of reduction may differ: from the elimination of one element through its identification with the other to the recognition of one of them – consciousness or the thing – as a secondary manifestation or product (function, property, *Andersein*, “a constituted correlate,” etc.) of another. In each case, however, the point is to place the “true being” on one side only.

- (4) “Neither of these two systems can directly refute its opposite, for their quarrel is about the first principle, which admits of no derivation from anything beyond it...” (Fichte, 1982, p. 12)

Because both consciousness “in itself” (independent from, and prior to, things) and the thing “in itself” (untainted with an apprehending consciousness) are abstractions, and therefore can never be given, what is left is to recognize one of them as a transcendental condition of the possibility of experience and, in that sense, the first principle, an underivable absolute. (The first principle need not be understood as an inferential basis from which everything follows according to some formal logic. It is enough to understand it as a condition of possibility of anything that can be thought – which, indeed, is the proper meaning of “transcendental condition”). The absolute absorbs everything and does not allow anything to exist apart from itself; in particular, it rules out the existence of another absolute. Indeed, consistent idealism and consistent naturalism do not have anything in common (despite – or rather because of – their formal common denominator of reduction): each of them is enclosed within the limits of its own logic. A dispute between these positions proves futile and can never be resolved. And when we try to combine them, they cancel each other out. For Fichte, the only criterion by which to choose between them is a practical one: “What sort of philosophy one chooses depends [...] on what sort of man one is; [...] A person indolent by nature or dulled and distorted by mental servitude [...] will never raise himself to the level of idealism” (Fichte, 1982, p. 16).

Now, let us make one more introductory remark, which goes beyond the above quotation from Fichte and anticipates further considerations: perfect abstraction or “total reduction” is impossible. And it is so not only in practical but also in logical terms, that is to say, by definition. If perfect abstraction or total reduction means such an operation on reality that leaves no “remainder,” which would not fit within a univocal whole, then abstraction cannot, by definition, be perfect, because it always assumes a “remainder,” something else from which it abstracts. It may seem like a verbal game, but I think that this game reveals the real nature of the problem: abstraction is a tool for dividing a complex whole, not for embracing it. The fact that there can be two “first principles,” one of which abstracts from what constitutes the *raison d'être* of the other, clearly shows that neither of them is really the first or absolute. Indeed, it shows them for what they are: expressions of one-sided thinking, which unwittingly assumes its other side. One-sided idealism and one-sided naturalism assume each other in such a way that they stand, as Hegel would have it, in a relation of external negation which sets their limits and thereby dismisses their claims to being absolute.

In practice, there were not many philosophers who remained so fond of abstraction as to utterly ignore that from which they tried to abstract, or so fond of reduction as to completely neglect what they were reducing. Therefore, both consistent idealism and consistent naturalism can be seen merely as models of thought, “ideal types,” rather than reliable and exhaustive descriptions of real thinkers’ positions.

Since the purpose of this essay is rather systematic, than historical-philosophical, it would be sufficient to draw the two models properly. In order to animate these models, however, I shall refer to specific philosophical propositions that seem quite exemplary: Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, on the one hand, and Paul Churchland’s eliminative naturalism on the other.

2. Reduction of the world to consciousness

As distinct from Berkeley, the “immanent idealist,” Husserl never claimed that the material world is the contents of a conscious mind, a set of ideas or perceptions, which are simply contained by consciousness as its inner “content” and have no other being apart from it. Developing Brentano’s concept of intentionality, Husserl argued that consciousness spontaneously relates to the world which it is not, the world which is transcendent to it. Nonetheless, he also claimed that – when viewed from a proper perspec-

tive, with a properly phenomenological and transcendental attitude – the very transcendence of the world and its very existence in reality prove to be nothing more than a sense of consciousness, a derivative of the way in which the conscious subject experiences the world.¹

Husserl was well-aware of the ambiguity of pre-philosophical experience in which consciousness and the world are given simultaneously as “inseparably connected” and different from each other. In his/her natural attitude, the conscious subject – although convinced of the existence of a world independent from him/her, and perceiving him/herself as a part of that world – realizes his/her own cogito as a stream of experiences and acts that do not have the character of things.² Phenomenological reduction will be based on the discoveries which consciousness makes about itself, and its only, though fundamental, novelty consists in “suspending,” “bracketing,” or “excluding” the naïve thesis of the world’s existence as absolute, self-contained, and independent of consciousness. This novelty, however, will also affect the scope of the very concept of consciousness, since reduction will allow us to discover that also features which “natural consciousness” (including, in particular, scientific consciousness) attributes to the world as its objective properties remain nothing more or less than a correlate of a certain kind of conscious acts, a “noema” of a certain “noesis,” in short, a property which is constituted by consciousness and hence makes sense only for consciousness. To put it differently, even though the world viewed from a phenomenological perspective remains transcendent in a strong sense in its “crude” being, it is only by virtue of consciousness that it acquires the sense of being such a transcendent world. Let us take a closer look at the mechanism and results of phenomenological reduction in its most radical version called epoché.

One may distinguish two movements in this version of reduction, even though Husserl himself does not distinguish these movements and considers them (especially in *Ideas I*) as simultaneous. It seems, however, that there are good reasons to make a distinction between them. The first movement is about releasing consciousness from its “naïve” entanglement in the world of things and discovering the fundamental difference between its immanent or “extra-worldly” existence and a transcendent or “intra-worldly” being. One can surely say that, at that stage, consciousness discovers its radical irreducibility to the world of things. In Husserl’s language, it means the final achievement of reduction, i.e. the reduction of spatial, material things. Now, the second movement is a consequence of the first one, but it runs, as it were, in an opposite direction: it bridges the gap between consciousness and the world of things by discovering that things themselves exist – or, to be precise, have the sense of existing – only as correlates of consciousness,

which is why they belong to its own world, not to another and independent one. Both these movements are based on a suspension of the thesis that the world of things has an objective existence and that the conscious subject objectively belongs to this world. Husserl argues repeatedly that the “suspension,” or “bracketing,” is not the same as calling into question, let alone negating. For the world “in brackets” does not cease to be given and nothing makes is different from what we experience in the “natural attitude.” Even our belief that the world really exists remains unshaken. The only change is that we no longer treat “real existence” as something that limits consciousness, that entangles it in some independent being. Instead, we perceive it as a phenomenon-for-consciousness. To conclude this point: there can be consciousness without any external world but there can be no world, i.e. no sense of being, without consciousness.

But let us develop these two movements of the Husserlian reduction a little more.

The corporeal and psycho-physical existence of the empirical subject also belongs to the being of the world. Thus, the emergence of consciousness from things means that it loses – at least in appearance, that is, for-itself, in its phenomenological reflection – its relationship with both the body and a specific, empirical psyche, in which consciousness and the body are merged and together amount to real facts or mental events that stand in causal relations with the real world. However, a consciousness which performs reduction has to break away precisely from this ambiguous mixture, rising, as it were, above its own corporeality and real, inner-world psyche; it needs to consider both of them as phenomena – special ones, to be sure, given in a different, much more intimate way than things that are simply external, but nonetheless separate, i.e. separable from the experiences through which they appear in consciousness.³ Consciousness detached from that of which it is conscious, especially from its own body, becomes “pure” consciousness, consciousness “as such,” or the very essence of consciousness, unrelated to an empirical individual (and thus apt to see universal essences of phenomena, both its own inner structures and those of the transcendent world).

According to Husserl, pure consciousness is given with apodictic evidence. In the first movement, it is given to itself as a realm of absolute immanence severed from the world, i.e. as a stream of self-transparent experiences, which have nothing in common with the temporal and spatial being of the real world. To be sure, many of these experiences intentionally relate to the world, but the very existence of intentions or acts (just as the existence of non-intentional experiences such as sense data or an ex-

perience of the perceptual horizon) has nothing to do with the existence of transcendent, spatiotemporal things. Assuming that the world exists beyond consciousness, intentions may somehow capture it; but because intentions are essentially different from the world, it follows that even if no world existed, their own existence would remain unaffected – although, as Husserl admits, this would cause their modification, e.g. they would not be ordered in any particular way which would correspond to the presentation of a thing in “ordered experiential concatenations,” as he calls it (Husserl, 1982, p. 106).⁴ In short, the first movement of reduction leads to the conclusion that “consciousness considered in its ‘purity’ must be held to be a *self-contained complex of being*, a complex of *absolute being* into which nothing can penetrate and out of which nothing can slip, to which nothing is spatiotemporally external and which cannot be within any spatiotemporally complex, which cannot be affected by any physical thing” and cannot exercise causation upon any physical thing – it being presupposed that causality has the normal sense of causality pertaining to Nature as a relationship of dependence between realities” (Husserl, 1982, p. 112); that consciousness – even though it cannot be called real in the same way as we speak of the real world – exists independently from any other world, which means that its existence is primary and absolute, or fundamental and non-reducible.

Still, it quickly – or rather, immediately – turns out that the difference between consciousness and the world is not radical at all. After all, what gap can separate an absolute being, which exists with necessity – or at least perceives itself as such a being, for it is given to itself in an indisputable manner – from a being that has only the status of a phenomenon for it? Even if the existence of the world does not exhaust itself in a phenomenon, even if – as Sartre has put it – “the phenomenon of being” is not the same as “the being of the phenomenon” (Sartre, 1992, pp. 7–30), phenomenological reduction consists precisely in suspending this difference. From the perspective of reduction, the existence of the world is nothing more than a phenomenon of the existence of the world. As a phenomenon, it exhausts itself in being-for-consciousness, that is to say, in making sense for consciousness. The phenomenon becomes a strict equivalent of intentions, acts, attitudes, and, ultimately, of passive experiences, “passive syntheses,” of consciousness. Hence Husserl’s radical conclusion: “the whole spatiotemporal world, which includes human being and the human Ego as subordinate single realities is, according to its sense, a *merely intentional being*, thus one [that] has the merely secondary sense of a being *for* a consciousness. It is a being posited by consciousness in its experiences which, of essential

necessity, can be determined and intuited only as something identical belonging to motivated multiplicities of appearances: *beyond that it is nothing*" (Husserl, 1982, p. 112).

In this way, phenomenological reduction, far from removing the world, leads to its radical transformation. First of all, it loses its existential and essential autonomy. It is no longer spatial and material in itself. Space and materiality are meanings given to his/her experience of the world by a conscious subject. Second, the world is no longer governed by causal laws thanks to some properties, which would be vested in it independently from any experience. Instead, it becomes a phenomenon to which consciousness, based on its own experience and intentions, gives the sense of a transcendent being, which is spatial, material, causal, etc.

Thanks to transcendental reduction, phenomenology, understood as a description of conscious experiences, is elevated to the rank of metaphysics in the original sense of the word, i.e. to the rank of the first philosophy, which captures the true being and describes the rules by which it is governed. The true being is the being of pure consciousness, its experience and intentional acts. From this perspective, it is pointless to explain the life of consciousness by the causal reactions of the physical world, because the very concept of the physical world and causality makes sense only for consciousness, that is to say, only insofar as it constitutes a correlate (and, moreover, merely a secondary correlate, mediated by modern science) of the cognitive operations of consciousness.

At first glance, Husserl's pure phenomenology creates a coherent idealistic system. (It is certainly useful and even necessary to distinguish between transcendental idealism as an epistemological position and the metaphysical one. While the first states that it is impossible to neglect the role of a conscious knowing subject in determining what the world is, what things and natural laws are because they make no sense without such a subject, the second claims that consciousness, or mind, or spirit [let's remove the possible distinctions between those concepts], is "more real" than the world of things, if not the only real. Husserl was without doubt a transcendental idealist, but was he also a metaphysical one and, if so, to what extent? The question, vividly debated by Husserl's disciples and commentators, is difficult. As I have emphasized, the very concept of intentionality protects Husserl from the "subjective idealism" in Berkeley's manner. The material world in its being is not an "immanent content" of consciousness. But it acquires the sense of such a world only for consciousness – in that it is only "secondary" in the hierarchy of being, while consciousness is "primary". However, the precise meaning of "primariness" and "secondariness" is lack-

ing. The difficulty only increases with the Husserlian term of constitution. Apparently, the philosopher hesitates between two distinct understandings of the concept: as free establishment and as “recognition in being” or “unveiling.” In other words, he seems to hesitate between its idealistic and realistic meaning. Thus, the question of the existence of “things in themselves” and the way they may affect consciousness remains unresolved. To put it very simply: are we perceiving things as material, spatial, and having some properties because they are such “in se”, or are they material, spatial and so on because we (as knowing subjects, as consciousnesses) perceive them in that way?

Many of Husserl’s analyses – especially in his later, both published and unpublished papers, but even those from *Ideas II* – seem to indicate that he saw the fundamental importance of the embodiment of consciousness for the creation of its basic experiences and intentions – beginning with the primordial, passive pre-impression, thanks to which consciousness gains its initial “now” and begins to exist as a stream of time through successive “sense data” and the corporeal-subjective experience of space and earthly ground. Husserl’s analyses of this kind seem to refute the idealistic thesis of the possibility of separating consciousness from the body, if only in thought. If our conscious experience is body-rooted, if, moreover, our body, though always proper and, until our death, living, has something, even much, in common with other bodies in the world, living, but also simply physical, then the perspective of “absolute consciousness” seems impossible to maintain. However, Husserl has never withdrawn his statement about the possibility of phenomenological-transcendental reduction. Even in his latest texts, he continues to recognize the “absolute being of pure consciousness.”⁵

To sum up, insofar as Husserl’s philosophy can be interpreted as radical idealism, it is as coherent as it is abstract, reductionist, and contradictory to ordinary experience; in turn, insofar as his position remains ambiguous, it better accords with ordinary experience, but fails to meet the criteria of a consistent theory.

3. Reduction of consciousness to the world

What is absurd for idealism turns out obvious for naturalism. According to the latter position, what exists is not only the material world independent of consciousness but also its objective, or rather absolute laws, which make it possible for a material system to emerge as what it is called conscious-

ness (as a function, property, effect of this system). “Consciousness” is thus nothing else than a result of objective/absolute causes which operate in an objective/absolute world. While the phenomenological reduction suspends our natural belief in the existence of things *in se* with their independent properties, the naturalistic one suspends, or at least tends to suspend, our belief in the real existence of our conscious experiences, in treating them as a kind of misleading appearances. The procedure goes so far as to suspend the existence of the very knowing and conscious subject performing such a reduction.

The reduction of consciousness to a “system of elementary particles” remains, at least for now, a purely utopian postulate. After all, there is no way to study how electrons, atomic nucleuses, quarks or quants behave during a conscious experience. Nor is it possible to demonstrate that their particular behavior *causes* – or *is the same as* – this experience. Less utopian, and at least partly based on empirical research, is the postulate of reducing consciousness to the action of neurons in the brain. Although neural networks are not the ultimate components of nature, one may assume that since these networks are undoubtedly material, their functioning is defined by the behavior of the elementary particles of matter and the laws of physics. Therefore, the reduction of consciousness to the material functioning of the brain is, on the principle of *pars pro toto*, the same as the reduction of consciousness to the material and causally closed world of physical nature.

We find a suggestive example of such reduction in Paul Churchland’s book, *The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul: A Philosophical Journey into the Brain* (1995). Perhaps, Churchland is not the most prominent representative of contemporary reductive naturalism, but his thought is representative enough to showcase the basic assumptions and postulates of this philosophical position, together with its weaknesses.

In an engaging and – as far as I can assess – competent way, Churchland describes the operation of the human and, more generally, the animal brain in neurocomputational terms, combining a biological perspective (which refers to research on the anatomy and functioning of biological brains) with an IT perspective (which refers to current and possible achievements of computer systems). Thus, he considers the brain, especially the human brain, as a kind of refined, evolutionarily produced, biological computer, which is capable of encoding and processing information from the surroundings in a way that is both effective (extremely fast and successful if we consider adaptation to the environment and survival of the organism as a measure of success) and flexible (open to various data configurations at the “input” and capable of their various processing, i.e. obtaining various configurations

at the “output”). This capability is due to an extensive neural network that operates synchronously, through interconnections, in many dispersed centers, i.e. local neural groups in individual parts of the brain coordinated by the central thalamus. The basic categories used to describe brain network activity in Churchland are “synaptic connections,” “neuronal activation levels,” “activation vectors,” “activation patterns” and, above all, a “recurrent network,” i.e. a system of interlayer connections, through which information coming from the level of sensory receptors to reach some level of the brain is shaped also by patterns that are already encoded at a higher level – a process which allows for dynamic interactions between “input” and “output” data. Such a conceptual framework makes it possible to describe perceptual and sensory-motor processes, the mechanism of memory and learning, and even creative thinking (which, in this perspective, consists in pulling certain data at “the input” under a different “activation pattern” than before, a pattern which determines the synapses’ connections at a higher level of the brain).

As a description of the functioning of the brain, the theory outlined by Churchland is quite convincing: it is not only consistent but also, and above all, it explains many facts already given in ordinary experience. Most importantly, it allows us to realize the close relationship between the functioning of the material head, or the whole body, and particular cognitive capabilities – or their deficiency caused by various damages to the nervous system, especially the brain. Moreover, Churchland’s theory explains numerous findings of modern biological and medical sciences. It makes it possible to demonstrate a close correlation between the state of the neural network and the “biochemical soup” (Churchland, 1995, p. 167), in which this network is submerged, and the state or quality of various mental operations, from perceptual to intellectual and moral ones. Today, hardly anyone would deny the existence of such a strict correlation.

However, there is another feature of Churchland’s position that makes it subject to controversy, while also revealing its proper reductionist sense. For Churchland is not content merely with determining the correlation between neural (i.e. physical) and mental or conscious phenomena. After all, a fact of even the strictest correlation can still support dualistic conclusions, according to which conscious experience is always correlated with a neural state, but it still differs from it fundamentally. Churchland, in turn, seeks to demonstrate that there is no difference between what we call consciousness and processes in the neural network, that consciousness is, in fact, nothing more or less than “an exquisite neurocomputational dance” (Churchland, 1995, p. 225) “the systematic expression of suitably organized physical phe-

nomena" (Churchland, 1995, p. 211), which can be explained by "the dynamical properties of appropriately recurrent networks" (Churchland, 1995, p. 222). In other words, Churchland's ambition is to identify consciousness with the functioning of a neurocomputational system, which, in principle, can be fully described in purely physical terms.

The chapter Churchland devotes to the discussion of this particular issue is entitled "The Puzzle of Consciousness" and begins with an emphatic statement: "Let us make no bones about it. Consciousness *is* puzzling" (Churchland, 1995, p. 187). However, the reader soon learns that, for Churchland, the only puzzling thing is that it is not clear what specific parts of the brain (is it the intralaminar nucleus for sure?), and how wide a loop of recurrent neural networks, generates consciousness. But the fact that consciousness is a product or manifestation of the functioning of neural networks remains unquestioned.

This is evidenced by the way in which Churchland deals with the arguments of all those (from Leibniz to John Searle, and even ordinary men in the street practicing "folk psychology") who have recognized the irreducible difference between the world of things (and hence neurons, too) and the world of conscious experiences, between the "third-person" and "first-person" perspectives. Churchland dismisses as a myth the belief in the existence of such a difference – an ignorant superstition which he compares to the earlier belief in the unique nature of light that, thanks to Maxwell's theory, turned out to be simply a class of electromagnetic phenomena. Analogically, it is thanks to scientific discoveries that the "light of consciousness" can be exposed as an ordinary class of biophysical phenomena.

In order to facilitate the reduction of consciousness to the behavior of a biocomputational network, Churchland describes consciousness, not in terms of its "essence" (first-person experience, intentionality, meaningfulness), but in terms of its functions, such as: short-term memory, independence of direct sensory inputs, attention steerability, the capacity for alternative interpretations of the same data, the ability to merge different sensations into a unified experience, and even the relatively less important functions like the ability to disappear in sleep and reappear in dreaming. He then concludes that such functions can be successfully performed by a "suitably configured recurrent network" (Churchland, 1995, p. 215). However, the question remains whether a "suitably configured recurrent network," which performs these functions, is also conscious in the intuitive sense of the word (radicalized in Husserl's phenomenology), i.e. does it have first-person experiences, does it intentionally relate to its own experiences, and do they make any sense to it?

Churchland responds to this kind of doubt in a skimpy and ambiguous way. First, (arguing against both the Cartesian tradition and “folk psychology”), he rejects the possibility that the mind has direct access to its own experience. Therefore, he seems to repudiate the very concept of conscious experience⁶ by claiming that our commitment to the categories of “thinking,” “desire,” “belief,” and the like, is simply a consequence of our ignorance of the real, objective nature of mental phenomena. However, a dozen or so pages further Churchland describes the difference between the “subjective” and “objective” views of mental processes by saying that these are two different ways of accessing the same phenomena, for “the core point here is that there is simply no conflict between being objective and being subjective. One and the same state can be both” (Churchland, 1995, p. 225). This thesis, taken out of context, can be understood in the spirit of neutral monism or “double aspect theory,” according to which reality itself is both “objective” and “subjective,” both material and mental. Such a position, however, is hardly reconcilable with Churchland’s arguments. When claiming that something can be “both objective and subjective,” he probably means that subjectivity is a secondary feature of what is objective, or physical, while the subjective or internal way of cognition, though illusory or even directly false (to the extent that it recognizes the reality of such beings as thoughts, desires, feelings, beliefs, etc.), is what has been actually practiced by people. In general, Churchland’s reflections on the brain/consciousness and objectivity/subjectivity relation show that it corresponds to the ontological relation between being and appearance and the epistemological relation between truth and falsehood. It is nonetheless symptomatic that even an author with such a strongly reductionist approach recurses to an unclear statement about reality that is “both such and such.” After all, even Churchland is compelled to realize that the reality of conscious experiences is too “tangible” to be simply relegated to the realm of illusion and falsehood.

Referring to the problem of meaning (or what Husserl would call *Sinn*, “sense”), Churchland seems to defend (although he does so in a very summary fashion, on less than two pages) the position that meaning is an effect of various “exemplary” relations in the network, and not something specifically related to consciousness. Thus, he departs from the intuitive meaning of “meaning,” according to which it is something between the conscious subject and the object, something that exists for that subject, that is to say, something that already assumes the existence of consciousness. Theoretically, there is nothing to prevent the term “meaning” from acquiring a different sense which abstracts from the subjective moment. In this view,

however, “meaning” is no longer what we usually “mean” by this term (which we distinguish from “reference,” a signified designate, and which we associate with experience). Therefore, a question arises concerning the relationship between this “extended” concept of meaning and its “narrow” understanding that assumes the existence of a subjective consciousness. It is not enough to assert that meaning belongs to objective relations in the network, for one has to justify that this assertion does not entail an arbitrary change of the meaning of the term “meaning” and to describe how it becomes a conscious meaning, i.e. meaning-for-consciousness, or how it generates consciousness itself. Churchland does not even try to discuss this problem. Nor does he claim that it is a puzzle. He simply passes it over with silence or even fails to notice it at all.

Therefore, the weakness of reductionist naturalism in the vein of Churchland’s theory is that it underestimates, ignores, or at best vaguely addresses the specific features of conscious experience. Such a theory is not only non-intuitive from the perspective of ordinary experience (let alone phenomenological experience) but also full of internal tensions and rather poorly concealed inconsistencies.

4. Summary without a conclusion

Nothing seems to suggest that contemporary philosophy has managed to solve the dilemma formulated by Fichte. Rather, it has continued to deepen it. Phenomenological research, which is constantly developing, continues to explore various types of intentional and non-intentional experiences in the idealistic vein. This applies even to these currents of phenomenology, which – beginning with Merleau-Ponty – have focused on the experience of corporeality and the bodily relationship between the conscious subject and the world. For even in such studies corporality is understood as primarily “meaning-giving.” At the same time, however, the dynamic development of research on the functioning of the brain and artificial intelligence leads an increasing number of philosophers to adopt a naturalistic position, according to which the meaning, or the sense, is no more than an effect of some physical mechanism.

There are interesting attempts to combine the phenomenological and naturalistic approaches within the framework of so-called neurophenomenology, as in Varela (1991) and some of his disciples or collaborators (such as Natalie Depraz), then in Gallagher and Zahavi’s (2012) research. However, they do not reach any binding conclusions, as they merely determine cor-

relations between the state of the body and the brain and the state of consciousness without ever deciding whether consciousness is only a function of physical processes in the “ordinary” sense of physics (concerning the known laws of physics) or not. One may, like D. Chalmers (1996), call for enriching the laws of physics with the law of consciousness, but this postulate only proves the difficulty of the problem, rather than solving it.

Thus, it is legitimate to doubt whether the fundamental difference between the idealistic and the naturalistic approach to the problem of consciousness can ever be erased or overcome. For the difference lies not only in methods. Not even only in perspective: between that of the “first person” and that of the “third” one. The main difference is, after all, of metaphysical, so not empirical nature. I am afraid we should agree with those who admit that the problem of the relation between consciousness and matter, or the so-called body-mind problem, is probably impossible to solve. The only thing we seem to know is that it is impossible to have a conscious experience without an appropriate “material substrate”, but how the processes occurring within such a substrate transform into subjective “light” giving both “sense” to the world and the experience of “myself” as consciousness – that is what remains unintelligible.

NOTES

¹ In *Ideas I*, Husserl writes: “one must not let oneself be deceived by speaking of the physical thing as transcending consciousness or as “existing in itself.” The genuine concept of the transcendence of something physical which is the measure of the rationality of any statements about transcendence, can itself be derived only from the proper essential contents of perception or from those concatenations of definite kinds which we call demonstrative experience. The idea of such transcendence is therefore the eidetic correlate of the pure idea of this demonstrative experience” (Husserl, 1982, p. 106).

² For instance, Husserl describes the relation between consciousness and the world – a relation given in the “natural attitude” – in the following way: “An individual consciousness is involved with the natural world in a dual manner: it is the consciousness belonging to some human being or beast; and at least in a great number of its particularities, it is consciousness of that world” (Husserl, 1982, p. 81). Already the first two chapters of the second part of the first book of *Ideas* make it clear that, in the “natural attitude,” i.e. before performing phenomenological reduction, one discovers the specificity of the cogito. Discussing the difference between sciences and the humanities in the first version of *Krisis*, Husserl writes even more explicitly about the duality of “natural experience,” which determines the two-fold approach to the human being as a natural fact and a person. He insists that, although both sciences and the humanities develop from the “natural attitude,” “their universal direction [...] is fundamentally different” (Husserl, 1970, p. 280).

³ Husserl, both in *Ideas II* and *Cartesian Meditations*, devotes much of attention to the way in which consciousness experiences its own body.

⁴ In this context, the following passage is particularly telling: "...while the being of consciousness, of any stream of mental processes whatever, *would indeed be necessarily modified by an annihilation of the world of physical things, its own existence would not be touched*" (Husserl, 1982, p. 110).

⁵ Let us clarify that phenomenological consciousness, or consciousness discovered and described in the phenomenological way, is not tantamount to what is often called "phenomenal consciousness" by certain adepts of the analytical philosophy of mind in the vein of Thomas Nagel or even John Searle. Consciousness understood in the Husserlian way is not only and not mainly a sphere of qualia (*What is it like to be a Bat?*), not only even the sphere of semantic understanding which would distinguish consciousness from computational syntax, but which remains something "inner" to biological organism as its "representations." Such a view separates the "inner" from the "external", in maintaining the absoluteness of the external, i.e. of the material world described by the laws of physics. The question is only to know how such a world can give place to consciousness, not what is the very status of the world as given-to-consciousness. One may contend that, for Husserl, instead, consciousness is both inner (as possibly quite independent from the physical world) and external (as the very origin of what is called world, things, natural laws, etc.). In other words, he does not distinguish between the internal and external, but between the for-consciousness and beyond-consciousness, in suspending the latter.

⁶ See Churchland (1995, p. 205). By claiming that a subject may be mistaken in recognizing his or her inner states, Churchland fails to see the difference between simple self-consciousness that allows one to be aware that he or she feels something, thinks, etc., and a reflexive interpretation and giving names to experiences. Therefore, he argues that, from the fact that one may misinterpret one's feelings, e.g. by taking envy for admiration, it follows that there is no such thing as immediate self-transparency of experience.

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