The First Person
– Avoiding the Problems of Consciousness
(Draft version)

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Abstract

To explain experience, an identity and a first person perspective is needed. Frequently, experience is treated separately from the other aspects of the mind, such as the cognitive abilities. Unfortunately this easily leads to the idea of a border between what is experienced and what is not. In this paper it is argued that from the perspective of the first person such a border does not exist and that it would be a category mistake to address it. In accordance with this idea, it is asserted that the first person perspective cannot be treated as a separate problem but must be a result of how the cognitive abilities are organized. To accomplish this, the mind can be seen as an evolutionary process with organizational closure. That way the mind obtains an identity meaning that there is something that *is* the mind and therefore something that it is like to be this very mind.

1 Introduction

Some years back (1995), Chalmers makes a division between the easy and the hard problems of consciousness. The (relatively speaking) "easy" problems are those that concern the explanation of cognitive abilities and functions, while the hard problem is the notion of (subjective) experience. The easy problems are easy, Chalmers argues, because a functional explanation is satisfactory. For the problem of experience, however, such an explanation would miss the point.

Because of the insufficiency of the standard methods of cognitive science, Chalmers thinks that we need "an extra ingredient in the explanation." He is not alone. To these days this ingredient has been pursued as far as into quantum physics (e.g. Jibu and Yasue, 1992; McCrone, 1994; Penrose, 1994). Chalmers argues, however, that these and similar attempts to find the extra ingredient fall short because they do not explain *why* these processes should result in experience.

I believe that the problem of experience arises from the very division of the easy and the hard problems. Such a division tempts us to treat the easy problems separately from the notion of experience. I agree that we can accomplish a lot of significant research neglecting the problem of experience. But I do not think that we can reach a final solution on these problems and then simply add experience to them. Instead I believe that experience should simply be there once the easy problems have been accounted for. If not, the solutions to the simple problems need to be revised.

In the next section I will discuss why experience appears to be such a hard problem. I will argue that it is a result of some dubious assumptions that are rarely called in question. Thereafter, I will propose to view the mind as an evolutionary process. Such an approach will allow us to assert organizational closure for the mind. This, in turn, entails identity and a first person perspective, which is precisely the extra ingredient that we need to explain experience.

2   The root of the problem

The Indian philosopher Krishnamurti said that "in the problem itself – not beyond it – is the answer" (1987, p. 339). Let us subscribe to this philosophy and not rush to solutions. Before we try to solve the problem of experience, we should find out whether it is at all necessary. We should ask ourselves what it is that is causing the problem. Remember that when we solve one problem we usually create ten new ones. It is better to reverse this destructive process. If we find a way to avoid one problem, we may, if we are lucky, get unburdened from another ten. Let us therefore examine whether our problem is founded on inappropriate assumptions. I will argue that indeed it is.

As was mentioned in the outset, the assumption to be questioned is the belief that experience is a problem that can be treated separately from the other issues of cognition – i.e. the "easy" problems. This belief pervades most contemporary cognitive science. A mainstream cognitive scientists can lecture for hours about the easy problems of cognitions. When a question concerning the hard problem is raised, the answer is likely to be that 'this is a later issue,' or 'it is out of the current interest.' Searle, however, in his recent book (1992) stresses the importance of experience. Or, as he puts it, the first person point of view is primary because "[m]ental states are always somebody's mental states. There is always a 'first person,' an 'I,' that has these mental states" (p. 20).

Clearly, we never need to deal with this first person point of view while giving the easy problems functional explanations. Therefore, the first person point of view must be attributed to the hard problem. Now, if we do consider the easy problems alone, the solutions that we will come up with will never address experience or the first person point of view. But once we have solved the "easy" problems we find ourselves in trouble – we have to deal with the "hard" problem. Because the first person viewpoint is never addressed, we easily imagine our "easy" problems to be outside the first person point of view. This, I assert, is a mistake and a source for new problems.

Once we find ourself outside the first person point of view, we want to get inside. We wish the products of the easy problem to penetrate the barrier from that which is not experienced into that which is. This barrier is the essence of the hard problem – it is what makes the "hard" problem hard. The only alternative to sprinkle some magic dust upon the mental states to evoke experience, seems to be to invent an agent. Without an agent, one may think that a first person point of view cannot be obtained. And without the first person viewpoint, experience cannot be obtained. Therefore, for some people, the employment of an agent goes without saying. "Let us not mince words. The difference between something that is and is not conscious is that there is something 'at home' in something that is conscious – something experiencing experiences, feeling feelings, perhaps even (though not necessarily) thinking thoughts" (Harnad, 1994, p. 164).

But, by introducing an agent, we have created a new problem: Where does this agent come from? One popular idea is to utilize consciousness itself as the agent. This may also explain the origin of consciousness by viewing it as a trait that has been evolved to give the organism greater power (e.g., Searle, 1992). But the agent approach is not a satisfactory answer to our question. Instead of explaining experience, all problems are moved to the question of consciousness. We would still have to explain what consciousness is and why anything crossing its border is experienced while anything that remains outside is not. Nothing is really accomplished with such an approach.

2.1   The border

Many of the problems we experience in studying experience stems from the fact that we start from a third person perspective, maybe in a wish to take an objective (scientific) standpoint. This approach works fine as long as we stick to the simple problems, but when it comes to experience we are in a desperate need for the first person viewpoint. The temptation to introduce an agent is strong. Not only can an agent satisfy the need of a first-person point of view, but also at the same time act as a user of the cognitive abilities that we have modeled in a third person perspective. That is, the agent can take over our role as the user of the theories that we have created – the agent can become the *manager* of our models. But, again, all that would be accomplished by falling prey to this temptation would be nothing but a mere reformulation of the problem.

Agent or not, the problem of crossing the border of experience remains. At least when we have some cognitive abilities and their products that are not experienced but should become so. It seems like this crossing of the border is the root of our problems, and therefore should we investigate whether we simply can avoid it. Let us start by investigating the border itself. Obviously, we cannot experience anything outside our border of experience. That there is anything that we do not experience, we can only conjecture. Still, this appears to be a fair assumption and it is in accordance with our intuitional feeling about this. Let us therefore, for a while, assume the existence of the border.

Our second option is to avoid the act of *crossing* the border. That is, instead of

confronting the problem of how anything *becomes* experienced, we should consider the idea that they already *are* so from the outset. This may sound like hair-splitting, but the difference is radical. In the former case we must cross the border, in the latter we do not. The latter case may, however, sound absurd. If nothing ever passes the border into the experienced, how could we ever come to experience anything at all?

If it sounds absurd, it is only because an assumption has been made that anything not explicitly experienced is bound not to be (but to become) experienced. Such an assumption produces the problem of how consciousness is generated. But, really, the problem is not how consciousness is generated – the problem is the very idea of generating it (cf. Seager, 1995). If we accept the idea of generating consciousness, then we have assumed from the outset the existence of the border as well as the act of crossing it. Therefore, we should consider abandoning this idea. I claim that the idea results from a confusion of perspectives. We have studied the cognitive abilities from a third person perspective. Thereby, experience is not addressed. Yet, we want to add the quality of experience to the cognitive abilities that we have studied. In doing that, we tend to assume that these abilities are *outside* the border of experience. But how do we know that? When we studied the abilities from a third person perspective, we did not address the notion of experience at all. That, however, does not mean that it is not there; the cognitive abilities may as well have been *inside* the border all along. We cannot know this, but considering the problems that arise by trying to cross the border of experience, it is well worth challenging the idea that we already are inside.

Perhaps we have better to consider the border once more. As mentioned above, we never experience anything outside the border. Neither do we experience the border itself. Still, we like to talk about a border – of an "out there" and an "in there." Again, I think there is a confusion of perspectives. Obviously, because we do not experience it, the border does not exist from the first person perspective. From a third person perspective, on the other hand, it does – or at least we can conjecture its existence. We like, for instance, to think that there is a border between the spheres of experience between two distinct individuals. If not, we would all be mind readers.

Consequently, when we study the problem of experience, the border is not an issue. In fact, it would be a category mistake to address it. Still, if we look at the issue from a third person perspective we may be perplexed. Schrödinger was. He wrote: "how is it that, despite the separateness and privacy of our spheres of consciousness, which must be ruthlessly asserted, despite their being hermetically sealed against each other, there can nevertheless come to be an understanding between them" (Schrödinger, 1983, "What is Real?", p. 71). To deal with this issue, we need to consider the nature of unities; what they are, what is their origin, and what is maintaining them. This will enable us to see how the observation may grow into existence inside the border of experience. If the observation is grown in the right place at the outset, there is no need to move it later (i.e., to cross the border).

3   The first person perspective

The sense in which our spheres of experience are hermetically sealed from each other is that the *identity* of a unity by definition never can be shared. The first person perspectives between two spheres of consciousness are now and forever separated. Nevertheless, any one of the spheres may embrace an image of the other person's sphere of consciousness, i.e., a third person perspective. In this sense, they are not separated but on the contrary mutually enclosed.

The way in which we may embrace another sphere of experience is that we can *discriminate* it from a background (cf. Maturana and Varela, 1980). This discrimination is done by us as observers, i.e., the first person. It is not done, or even caused, by the object observed. Therefore, it is not the case that some perceptual properties of the observed object cross the border of experience into the observer. Instead, the discrimination *grows from* – and is *local to* – the observer. By the act of distinguishing something from a background, the object comes into existence to the observer. Before such an distinction is made, the observer does not know that the object exists.

To say that the discrimination grows from the observer is to say that the cognitive effort of observation is performed by the observer. This is not a trivial statement because prior to the effort, the object to be distinguished is not known to exist by the observer. Still, the observer somehow manages to discriminate it. In what follows I will outline a possible approach, an approach that not only shows how the mind can make new discoveries, but also how it avoids crossing the border of experience in doing so.

3.1   Mind as Evolution

The problem of how we can come to see what we cannot see seems like an enigma. But, in fact, we already have a theory for it. Biological evolution is doing exactly this – picking up new structures from the environment. We may think of evolution as an observer. When the giraffe got its neck extended, evolution was observing the fresh leaves in the tree-tops. The observation and the extension of the neck was not successive, however, but simultaneous. The evolution used the extended neck of the giraffe to "see" with.

A more common way to express this is to talk about "natural selection." That is, the giraffe got its neck extended because this trait increased the probability of survival. This is perfectly alright. But one must keep in mind that natural selection is an invented concept, introduced for the benefit of the observer. Natural selection is not an agent with a god-eye's view equipped with the causal power to select the fit from the unfit. It is a metaphorical way to talk about the effects of exposing a structure to an environment.

This is crucial when it comes to the mind. If we view the mind as an evolutionary process, we do not want it to depend on any agent (read: homunculus) to supervise the process of learning. If we used an agent it would need the ability to discriminate the things that it wants the mind to learn, and, as a consequence, the mind could not learn what this agent could not discriminate (cf. Meno's Dilemma, Pallbo, 1997; Plato,

1981). What this agent would be able to discriminate would be dictated by the biological evolution and thus severely restricted. The power of the learning mind, however, is that it can react to an environment much faster than biological evolution. It can make discoveries within the life-span of one individual, discoveries that biological evolution would not yet have had time to discover. It can also make discoveries of things with such a short duration that is lies outside the reach of biological evolution (cf. the idea of generational dead time, Lorenz, 1977). Therefore, the mind cannot rely on the discrimination capabilities of biological evolution, but must invent its own source of making new discoveries.

If the mind itself could be regarded as an evolutionary process, then we could attribute the ability to make new discriminations to the mind. The theory of evolution, however, has adapted to the case of biological evolution. Therefore, we cannot immediately apply this theory to the mind without modifications (even if such attempts exist in contemporary cognitive science (e.g. Edelman, 1989)). We need to isolate the key concepts of evolution and discard those that are specific to biological evolution. Then, we can fit the resulting framework to the mind without much resistance. I will not go into detail of how this can be done as this has already been done in a previous paper (Pallbo, 1994). Instead, I will restrict myself to simply outline the idea.

In order to be regarded as an evolutionary process, the mind must, like any evolutionary process, produce a mechanism of variation. Biological evolution relies on the imperfection in cell reproduction. As already mentioned, this mechanism is too slow to account for the mind. Therefore, the minds needs a different source.

A good candidate to serve as the mechanism of variation is the disturbance caused by the neural background activity, i.e., spontaneous discharges of activity in the neurons. Spontaneous activity is a good candidate because it directly affects how the mind operates. If we assume that a discrimination done by the mind directly corresponds to some neural activity, then, by disturbing this activity, variations will be accomplished in a very direct way. In essence, what is produced is noise, and, left on its own behalfs, noise is what we would get. But if we allow the neural activity to be influenced by various structures – by letting only the activity that harmonizes with these structure to remain active and letting all other activity vanish – the situation changes. Rather than noise, we get a patterns of activity that in some sense reflect the structures that they have been influenced by.

Now we should recognize that what is influencing the neural activity is basically two things: the synaptic state of being and the activity of the sensors. That is, the neural activity will reflect both the preserved knowledge of the mind (due to the synapses) as well as the environment (due to the sensors). But neural activity in itself will modify the synapses (and, in many situations, also the environment). Therefore, we get a cyclic dependency; neural activity influences the synapses and the synapses, in turn, influences the neural activity.

Without noise, this circularity will lead to nowhere, but in its presence we get a process that is able to absorb increasingly more complex structures from the environment. That is, the mind is able to do more and more complex discriminations. The environ-

ment is full of structures that can be discriminated by an effort by the observer. The preserved knowledge of the mind makes this task easier for structures that has been discriminated before. And the noise makes it possible to discriminate new structures.

The nice thing about this arrangement is that the source of variation, the spontaneous activity, is of a very simple nature. No *a priori* knowledge of how it will affect the process is needed. Instead, the effect of the spontaneous activity will be determined by both the complexity of the knowledge accumulated in the synaptic configuration as well as to the environment to which it is exposed. Furthermore, as the complexity of the retained knowledge evolves, the *effects* of the spontaneous activity will likewise increase in complexity (Pallbo, 1997).

Most important for the previous discussion, however, is that the discriminations take shape *inside* the system. Information on how to create these discriminations is not imposed from outside. It is the process itself that performs the cognitive effort to discover new discriminations, and the discriminations that are made are private and local to the system. Therefore, nothing needs to cross the border of experience. There is no border to be seen by the system itself from its first person perspective. The only border present, is the one imposed by the privacy of the discriminations. This border, however, exists exclusively in the third person perspective.

A consequence of the considerations above is that what the mind experiences is not the external world, but the discriminations that it itself has fabricated. Furthermore, just like the biological evolution uses the neck of the giraffe to see with, the mind sees with the discriminations. There is no additional system that observes the content of the mind. Instead, "[t]he content of consciousness is consciousness – the two are not separate" (Krishnamurti, 1987, p. 59). That is, we "*enact* a world as a domain of distinctions that is inseparable from the structure embodied by [our] cognitive system" (Varela et al., 1991, p. 140).

3.2 Identity

Even if the view of the mind as an evolutionary process enables a view of the mind without an agent, it does not explicitly address the hard problem of experience, the problem of *why* anything is experienced and where the first person perspective arises from. To deal with this issue, we must demonstrate an organizational closure of the mind.

The problem reduced significantly in complexity once we discarded the source of the problems. We no longer have to explain how anything "out there" crosses the border to the "in there" of the mind. Neither do we have to explain how any agent comprehends the content of the mind. All that we need to show is that the mind exists as a unity and that it depends on nothing but itself for its existence. In other words, that it is an autonomous entity–an organizational closure–in contrast to being externally controlled. If we are able to show this, there would be a first person perspective of this unity because there would be something that *is* this unity, and there would be something that it is *like* to be this unity (cf. Nagel, 1974).

Organizational closure thus forms the basis of identity. It is important to distinguish organizational closure from physical closure. The organizational closure just ensures the organizational independency of the unity. The unity may still be, and probably is, physically open. That is, it is physically affected by the environment. This, in fact, is crucial if the unity should not remain hermetically sealed. Thus, our unity is both closed (organizationally) and open (physically) at the same time.

The theory of autopoiesis was developed to address the issue of identity and organizational closure (Maturana and Varela, 1980; Varela, 1979). Maturana and Varela recognized that a unity is defined by an act of distinguishing it from a background. An autopoietic organization is, in short, a unity that performs this act itself. More formally (and perhaps slightly more incomprehensible), Maturana and Varela defines an autopoietic process as:

> "a machine organized (defined as a unity) as a network of processes of production (transformation and destruction) of components that produces the components which: (i) trough their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in the space in which they (the components) exists by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network" (1980, pp. 78).

That is, an autopoietic machine (where "machine" should be understood in its broadest sense) is a process that constitutes both its own product as well as the process that maintains it. In contrast, the unity does neither produce nor maintain the background, whereby the unity performs an act of distinguishing itself from this background.

The question that we then must raise is whether the mind can be ascribed autopoietic organization. This would mean that the mind should maintain its own organization. This contrasts to the prevalent opinion that the *brain* gives rise to and maintains the mind. If the latter idea stands correct, the mind cannot be an autopoietic organization and all conclusions of this paper fail.

But how could the brain maintain the mind? Does it even know that it is there? We like to think of biological evolution as a sculptor. It sculptures the bodies, the brain and the mind because *it* has seen the evolutionary advantages of these traits. But as was mentioned above, the trait (like the long neck of the giraffe) and the observation of its advantages are simultaneous. The trait itself provides the means for the process of evolution to behold the advantage of the very same trait. Viewed this way, it does make sense to say that the trait arranges for its own maintenance by making the underlying process of evolution preserve it. By the benefits it entails, the trait assures the process of evolution to maintain that trait. Therefore, it is not the evolution that "programs" the brain to maintain the mind, but the mind that *infects* the process of biological evolution.

To enable evolution to recognize the advantages of the mind, the mind must integrate as a part of the hosting organism. This might seem to conflict the autopoietic organizational closure that was advocated for the mind above. How could anything with organizational closure constitute a part of a composition? The answer is that for the composition it is irrelevant whether the parts exhibit organizational closure or not.

What is relevant is whether the parts are interacting with the environment in a way that is beneficial to the composition or not. The autopoiesis, and thereby the local identity of that part, can therefore remain unaltered (Maturana and Varela, 1980). It should be kept in mind, however, that the identity of the part is not conveyed to the composition. The composition could, though, acquire an identity of its own by constituting an autopoietic organization itself.

What regards the mind, this means that it could very well play the dual role as both an autopoietic organization as well as an integrated part of the organism. The identity of the mind is not the same as the identity of the organism or the body. Anyhow, it must harmonize with the organism in order to assure its own existence. If it fails to accomplish this and ceases to provide a benefit to the organism, it will be tossed out by its host. And this would be the end of the story for the mind, because it is ineluctably inseparable from the brain even if the brain and the mind do not share the same identity. The brain is a physical organ of the organism with a physical neurophysiological organization of its parts. The mind, on the other hand, is an abstract organization of present and potential neural activity patterns that is embodied by, but not identical to, the brain. If you take away the brain, the mind has to go with it, but if the organization of the mind disintegrates, the brain will still be there. Indeed do the brain and the mind have a close relationship – but this relationship is not equality.

4   Conclusion

To conquest the problem of experience one certainly must, in some way, achieve a first person perspective. It has been the purpose of this paper to argue that such a first person perspective must be proclaimed with great care. If the first person perspective is established outside that which is to be perceived, then one is confronted with the problem of crossing the border between the "out there" and the "in there." This happens when we think of the experiencer as an *agent* residing inside the mind. Even if this agent is rarely explicit in contemporary models, it is frequently implicitly assumed. To avoid such an *homunculus*, one must not separate the experienced from the experiencer, but assume that the experienced constitute a system or a process that acquires a first person perspective by the way it is organized.

Such an organization was advocated for the mind. By viewing the mind as an evolutionary process, we accomplish both a mind without an agent as well as an organizational closure. That way, an identity and thereby a first person perspective is obtained. Furthermore, since we never have to step outside the first-person perspective in this approach, the problems of the border and the act of crossing it does not arise. Thereby, by dismissing these problems, we also dismiss the "hardness" of the problem of experience.

If this is the good news, then the bad news is that the "easy" problems increase in complexity. When dealing with these problems, we must now ensure that we remain inside the organizational closure. This means that we must withdraw our control from the processes we model. There is no place for any controller because there is no in-

terface with which we can interact with the mind we model. This also means that any interpretation of what is going on inside requires an immense cognitive effort by the observer. The mind itself has neither any reason to reveal its whereabouts nor is it obliged by anyone to comply with formal scripts. It is organizationally closed and it has no interests to support anything, or anyone, but itself.

This does not mean that a third person perspective on the mind is inapt. In contrast, this is the only way we can approach the cognitive abilities as we unavoidably are outside the mind when we observe it. What it does mean, however, is that we should not be confined to this perspective. The problem of experience cannot be treated posterior to the simple problems. Experience cannot be attached to crown the work, but should be an outcome of the cognitive abilities put to work.

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