

Consciousness Reconsidered

by Owen Flanagan

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1.1 Owen Flanagan is very clear about what his latest book, *Consciousness Reconsidered* is supposed to do. He writes that "we can make intelligible the existence of consciousness in the natural world," (p. 2) and that his "aim is to say something illuminating about the nature, function, and origin of consciousness" (p. 1). However, he is quick to point out that he is "[providing] no argument against non-naturalism," (p. 2) "the view that consciousness is not a natural phenomenon and therefore cannot be understood in naturalist terms" (p. 1).

1.2 We remark upon this because what Flanagan actually accomplishes in the book is almost exactly the opposite of his expectations. That is, he in fact provides several very persuasive arguments against non-naturalism, yet (in our opinion) is not successful at explaining the existence of consciousness. There is nevertheless much about his book to recommend it, and to recommend it highly; however, what we admire most about *Consciousness Reconsidered* --- his discussions of the "new mysterians" and other skeptical breeds --- is what Flanagan undervalues, and where we think Flanagan slips is in his positive program --- articulating a framework for understanding consciousness.

1.3 There are two distinct aspects to Flanagan's book. On the one hand, Flanagan presents arguments against those who are skeptical of the naturalizing project. On the other, he sketches a positive view of how consciousness might in fact fit into the natural world. Unfortunately, as we understand matters, these two aspects --- as Flanagan conceives them --- end up being in tension because the natural method he advocates requires more than the armchair speculation found in some sections of the book.

1.4 Flanagan advocates a methodology that he calls "constructive naturalism," an approach that would use first person reports of phenomenal experiences, psychological models of our cognitive processes, and neurophysiological data concerning how those processes are implemented in the brain to triangulate onto a theory of consciousness (though we were a bit disappointed to see that when he tried to apply that method, he quoted from other philosophers more often than the scientists themselves). A very sensible approach; in fact, in reading Flanagan's description, one is struck by the fact that this approach is so new, since once described, it seems so prudent and obvious. But that is part of the beauty of Flanagan --- he can make hard things seem easy, intuitive positions seem silly, and his point of view seem almost mundane. And that is just what forays into consciousness these days demand --- a sensible, balanced, no-nonsense, articulate examination of what in damnation it is that we are talking about when we talk about our qualitative experiences.

1.5 Flanagan's outstanding achievements in this book by far are his arguments against non-naturalism --- they are clear, subtle, persuasive and illuminating. He considers an enormous variety of contemporary non-naturalistic positions and arguments and carefully explains why they are misleading or misguided or just plain wrong. And he does this without making straw figures of his opponents. His characterization of eliminativists and epiphenomenalists (e.g., Patricia Churchland, Georges Rey, Paul Churchland) on the one hand, and the neo-mysterians (e.g., Thomas Nagel, Colin McGinn, Frank Jackson) on the other, would serve as a superb text for introducing those positions. In addition, he outlines in some detail other possible replies to the non-naturalist position, how those replies differ from his own, and why his are preferable.

1.6 For example, in the chapter "Quining Consciousness," Flanagan details subtle differences in the eliminativist arguments offered by Patricia Churchland (1983) and Georges Rey (1983), who each draw analogies between the concepts of consciousness and other concepts that have been dropped from our theoretical framework, "phlogiston" and "karma," respectively. The disanalogy Flanagan finds between consciousness and phlogiston is that the term "phlogiston" is associated with a regimented, orthodox conception which was discovered to have a null extension; however, there is yet no regimented, canonical concept of consciousness, hence, we are not yet in a position to discover that it has a null extension. Ironically, one of the very complaints which Churchland has about the concept serves to undercut her argument for its elimination. What is sometimes put forward by philosophers as the canonical concept --- a transparent, incorrigible, immaterial state --- may be regarded as a probably false set of claims about consciousness. However, that these claims are true of no object does not entail that consciousness does not exist if these claims are not regarded as constitutive of the notion. Instead, Flanagan suggests that "conscious experience names the class of mental states or events that involve awareness. A conscious experience is a state such that there is something it is like to be in it. Luckily, these ideas are vague and compatible with all manner of theoretical refinement" (p. 31). And this starting point allows him to point out the disanalogy he finds between the notion of karma and consciousness. The notion of karma functions only as a proposed explanans; "karma" does not pick out some phenomena to be explained in some deeper way. Once we drop karma as an explanans,

nothing of the notion remains. In contrast, consciousness is a robust phenomenon in need of explanation; it is a familiar fact that some of our mental states are states such that there is something it is like to be in them. Consciousness is an explanandum.

1.7 We find his arguments along these lines to be very persuasive, so we remain a bit puzzled at his opening disclaimer: why shouldn't we consider these to be arguments against those skeptical of building a theory of consciousness? Flanagan is too modest.

1.8 The upshot of the passages is that the notion of consciousness being a bit muddled is exactly what saves it in the end. There is no canonical view of what is necessary and sufficient for being consciousness. Nevertheless, this fact does not make us powerless. There still is lots we can do to learn about the why's and wherefore's of conscious experience, hence, the advocacy of constructive naturalism. As Rorty (1982) remarks, studying consciousness is just like studying anything else. Flanagan reminds us what this means.

1.9 However, Flanagan's admitting that we really know very little about consciousness sits uneasily with the second aspect of his book, "saying something illuminating about the nature, function, and origin of consciousness." If we really do know very little about consciousness, even though we fully expect to know a great deal about it someday, and even if we have good reason to believe consciousness is part of the natural world, then ipso facto we cannot now say much intelligible about consciousness's origins and functions.

1.10 Indeed, we find Flanagan's attempt to locate plausible aspect of the book (Chapters 2 and 10). Flanagan first asserts that the best view we have of the mind/brain today is as having evolved under Darwinian selection pressures to help us represent the world to ourselves in order to facilitate the notorious four F's: feeding, fighting, fleeing, and reproducing. Let us assume that this is true. Flanagan then suggests that we should consider thought qua problem-solving strategies as a miniature pseudo-Darwinian struggle in which different ideas "fight" among themselves to survive (and presumably reproduce somehow?). The contents of consciousness then reflect the winner, the best solution to whatever problem currently engages the brain. We see no reason to adopt Flanagan's second assumption --- why should we believe that conscious experience is like that? Consider the following rather trivial examples of a focused and vivid conscious experience that does not seem to reflect any sort of winner in an idea-competition: concentrating on threading a needle, being engrossed in the latest horror flick, the sharp pain in one's hand after slamming it in a door and subsequently removing it. Why should we be conscious when having those experiences, given Flanagan's story?

1.11 Flanagan does give a just-so story about how consciousness could have evolved through natural selection, but just-so stories run counter to his very simple methodological suggestion --- use all the information one can get from any science that seems relevant to the task at hand; otherwise, wait until the data is available. Just-so stories aren't very scientific. Indeed, as long as we are allowed to spin arm-chair theories, why not consider consciousness to be a phenotypic free-rider, like the chin, such that no

Darwinian story is going to explain its purpose, since it does not have one. Though Flanagan's story does cover quite a range of phenomena, including personal identity, self-consciousness, and brain-damaged subjects, we find it lacking what the rest of the book has --- a critical, careful look at what we are justified in claiming about conscious phenomena.

1.12 This defect notwithstanding, we still recommend this book highly. Flanagan has dealt a serious blow to those in the non-naturalist or neo-mysterian camp who would argue that a theory of consciousness is either a pointless pursuit or in principle impossible to give. *Consciousness Reconsidered* should serve well as a prolegomena toward a future naturalist theory of consciousness.

References

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