

The Properties of Conscious Experiences: A Second Reply to John Beloff

Ullin T. Place

Boltby, Thirsk,

North Yorkshire, YO7 2DY

In responding to my reply to his critique of what he calls "the Searle fallacy", John Beloff claims that it is an

"inescapable fact ... that there is precisely nothing that can be said of a given conscious experience, be it visual, auditory, multimodal or whatever, that can be ascribed to electro-chemical events in the brain. And, of course, no two things can be identical if they have nothing in common. Indeed, they cannot be identical unless whatever is true of the one is true of the other."

I agree with Beloff in accepting Leibniz's principle that two descriptions cannot relate to one and the same thing, if what is true of the common referent under one description is not or cannot be true of it under the other description. It follows that if he can show that nothing that is true of a conscious experience could be true of an electro-chemical event in the brain, my contention that all conscious experiences are electro-chemical events in the brain would be defeated. Consequently, since I still hold that is what they are, it has to be my view that there are no properties of a conscious experience that either are not or could not be properties of an electro-chemical event in the brain and vice versa. That has

been my view for the past forty years and I have seen no argument or evidence in the whole of that time that has led me to think otherwise. The only candidate for such a property which Beloff has suggested is the property of being known about through introspection. But that, as I pointed out in my previous reply to him, is a property of the way a particular kind of description of the event is arrived at, not a property of the event itself. The other properties of conscious experiences are all ones which are either known to apply to electro-chemical events in the brain or can be reasonably expected so to do.

Such properties are of four kinds:

- (a) location in space,
- (b) location and extension in time,
- (c) location within a causal nexus between sensory input on the one hand and motor output on the other, and
- (d) the so-called 'phenomenal properties' or 'qualia'.

Of these, I take it, the only ones that are controversial are the first and the fourth. Beloff appears to concede both that there are brain events which are invariably correlated with conscious experiences and, in so far as he rejects epiphenomenalism, that conscious experiences are located within the causal nexus intervening between sensory input and motor output. The two remaining property types, spatial location and the phenomenal properties, are connected.

The argument for saying that conscious experiences cannot be located where their putative electro-chemical counterparts are located, namely in the brain, is that there is an apparent conflict between being so located and having the phenomenal property of being located elsewhere, e.g., in my now non-existent right big toe. That this conflict is not a

genuine conflict becomes apparent as soon as we realise that phenomenal properties, as they are described, are properties that things appear to have, but do not actually and literally have.

The point is this. We are intimately acquainted with our own conscious experiences and their properties and we suppose wrongly that this gives us a unique epistemic authority concerning their nature, one which tells us that these experiences and their properties cannot be what all the evidence suggests they are, namely electro-chemical events in our brains and properties of such events. In fact, when we try to put what we know by acquaintance into words which another person can understand, we find that there is very little we can say about it. The reason for this is that our language is designed primarily to enable us to communicate across intersubjective physical space with other human beings located in that space about objects, events and states of affairs, which, though they need not be in the current stimulus environment of either party, either are, were, or will be firmly located in physical space or are represented by the speaker and understood by the listener as being so located.

In order to perform this function the meaning of the lexical words and sentence frames which make up the language have to be anchored to features of this public world. As Wittgenstein shows in his so-called private-language argument (*Philosophical Investigations I*, 242ff.), a language the meaning of whose words is anchored to the private conscious experiences of a single individual could not be understood by anyone else. It follows that the language we actually have is poorly adapted to the

communication of conscious experiences. Because they are private, the only way we have of characterising such experiences is by reference to what has been called their "publicly observable concomitants" in the standard case. On the input side, the publicly observable concomitants of a conscious experience are the events and states of affairs in the public world that typically gives rise to an experience of that kind. On the output side, they are the things an experience of that kind typically inclines us to publicly say and do. Once we appreciate that that is all our language allows us to say about our conscious experiences, we realise, as I put it in the (1956) paper,

"that there is nothing that the introspecting subject says about his conscious experiences which is inconsistent with anything the physiologist might want to say about the brain processes which cause him to describe the environment and his consciousness of that environment in the way he does".

Evidently the view expressed in this passage directly contradicts what Beloff describes as an "inescapable fact". If it is true, Beloff's statement that

"nothing that can be said of a given conscious experience ... can be ascribed to electro-chemical events in the brain"

is not only escapable, it is not a fact. Equally, of course, if he is right, my claim must be false. But, whereas I give reasoned argument in support of my view, he supports his only by verbal abuse of those such as myself, who disagree with him.