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Volition and Property Dualism

My overall aim here is to intersect two issues central to Max Velmans' (2002) wide-ranging paper. The first concerns one of the most vexing problems in consciousness research — how best to approach the terms 'mental' and 'physical'. The second looks at the phenomenology of volition, and the degree to which information presumably necessary for making voluntary conscious decisions is, or is not, present in consciousness.

Velmans offers three general reasons to motivate his position: the physical world is 'causally closed' to the influence of consciousness; consciousness does not contain the information necessary for making volitional decisions; conscious feelings of volition occur before the acts they supposedly cause. It seems to me that none of this holds up well under scrutiny. I will concentrate on the first two reasons, since I think they involve more basic and widespread aspects of consciousness research.

(1) Velmans' position demands that we accept the existence of an absolute causal asymmetry between the brain and consciousness. He recognizes that the brain has causal power over consciousness at least to the degree that the brain is able to shape the contents of consciousness, which include representations of the brain's own non-conscious neural activity and representations of the external world. And Velmans is willing, at least in the Appendix of his paper, to grant that the brain does in some sense cause consciousness.

Nevertheless, Velmans asks us to believe that causal activity which flows so constantly in one direction never flows in the other; that consciousness has no power whatsoever to affect the brain; that what naively seems to us to be the exercise of conscious control over the rest of our organism is an illusion. Our feelings of making decisions and exercising willpower are, according to Velmans, accurate only in one sense — they accurately represent the activity of the non-conscious cognitive domain that in reality is doing all the cognitive work. For Velmans, the fact that an 'act consciously feels as if it is voluntary and controlled suggests that the processes which have generated that experience *are* voluntary and controlled, as conscious experiences generally provide reasonably

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accurate representations of what is . . . actually taking place in our own central nervous system' (p.20, Velmans' emphasis).

This aspect of Velmans' argument is based on an inductive extrapolation, derived from an otherwise solid general finding about consciousness — namely, that the contents of consciousness typically represent entities or processes that are not themselves in consciousness. Conscious acts of volition do not fit this general picture, for if they do occur, they are themselves causally potent events, and not passive representations of causally potent events occurring somewhere else.

We certainly have no *a priori* reason to believe that all conscious experiences must always and only function as representations. For better or worse, the cognitive status of conscious contents has to be discovered inductively — and extrapolating from a tendency to a universal conclusions is risky business in science, even if there is no clear counter-example. But feelings of volition *do* appear, on the face of it, to constitute an important case of conscious contents that are not representational in the above sense. Furthermore, if conscious volitional contents are non-representational, we would still expect most conscious contents to be representational, since the intelligent exercise of volition must draw on complex information about our organism and the external world, and this information would still have to be supplied to consciousness as representations.

For these reasons, it seems to me that the extensive review of the representational function of consciousness in Velmans' paper has no force because it is beside the point. It is as if someone wishing to deny reports of black swans in Australia responded with an exhaustive review of swan sightings in Europe, pointing out that they were all white to a swan.

(2) A more fundamental problem with Velmans' position involves his conception and use of the 'mental/physical' and 'first-person/third-person' contrasts. I think this points to a serious mistake of emphasis: *The relationship of consciousness to the rest of the physical world is clearly not as disjoint as Velmans, and many others, take it to be.*

Consider, for example, Velmans' discussion of Searle. Velmans calls Searle a 'property dualist', a label Searle himself denies (Searle, 2002). But I don't want to bicker here about the accuracy of Velmans' attributions; I believe the points are still suggestive whether or not they are in every case actually held by Searle. Velmans doubts that Searle's

property dualism could really be a form of *physicalism*. Searle insists that consciousness is a physical phenomenon, produced by the brain in the sense that the gall bladder produces bile. But he also stresses that subjectivity and intentionality are defining characteristics of consciousness. Unlike physical phenomena, the phenomenology of consciousness cannot be observed from the outside; unlike physical phenomena, it is always *of* or *about* something. So, even if one accepts that consciousness is, in some sense, caused by the brain, why call it 'physical' as opposed to 'mental' or 'psychological'? Merely *relabelling* consciousness, or moving from micro- to macroproperties doesn't really close the gap between 'objective' brains and 'subjective' experiences! (pp. 26–7, Velmans' emphasis.)

In passing, let me speculate on a possible source of misunderstanding between Velmans and Searle. In English, the use of ‘dual’, ‘dualism’, and their cognates often suggests that two domains, of more or less equal standing, are in opposition to one another. But for many who hold materialist positions, the presumption is that the relationship between ‘mental’ and ‘physical’ is in one sense more integrated, and in another more hierarchical — the mental is taken to be a small subset of entities and processes among the much more inclusive set of entities and processes that, *in toto*, constitute the material world.

In any case, Velmans is hardly alone in treating the relationship between mental and physical in oppositional terms. Officially, Velmans’ ontological position is monist, his epistemological stance dualist. It seems to me his dualist inclinations are a good deal more robust than necessary, especially given that the final aim of his analysis is to rise to an integrated monism. On my reading, Velmans generally treats the mental/physical relationship as decidedly more incompatible than integrated.

For example, in a long footnote extending his argument in the paragraph quoted above, Velmans insists that ‘first-person consciousness cannot be thought of as a “physical” property of the brain in any conventional, third-person sense of the term “physical”’ (p. 27, fn 20). I gather this is meant to amplify his claim that ‘unlike physical phenomena . . . consciousness cannot be observed from the outside.’ But of course in at least one ‘conventional, third-person sense’ of physical phenomena, unobserved physical entities are accepted by physics all the time. Sub-atomic particles are a standard example: Their possibility was suggested indirectly via complex mathematics, and their existence established indirectly via their effects on the media in bubble chambers.

But we can stay within the boundaries of the third-person scientific standpoint and go much further than just entertain the *possibility* that consciousness is something physical. For if the brain causes consciousness, then consciousness is *presumptively* physical. From the most straightforward, conventional, and completely third-person scientific standpoint, if a physical process is taken to cause something, then that something is presumed to be physical as well. By itself, this presumption is just that, a presumption built into the normal operating assumptions of science. But this is enough to establish that as a logical matter the third-person stance is perfectly capable of handling the issue of consciousness and of handling it as something completely *within* the domain of the physical world, assuming we grant that the brain does in some sense cause consciousness.

One consequence of this is to undercut the first of Velmans’ motivations for framing his theory: that because the physical universe is ‘closed’ there is ‘no room for conscious intervention’ (p.3, Abstract). For there is no problem to begin with if consciousness is a property of matter. Velmans simply *assumes* from the start that consciousness cannot be a physical entity or process. With this as his point of departure, it is hardly surprising that Velmans’ theory moves so quickly into epiphenomenalism (though I do not believe Velmans himself accepts this label).

(3) On the face of it, then, Velmans would seem to be mistaken in his claim that ‘first-person consciousness cannot be thought of as a “physical” property of the brain in any conventional, third-person sense of the term “physical”’ (p. 27, fn 20). Of course we can think of first-person consciousness as having the brain as its cause, and we can think of first-person consciousness as having causal power. We can think of the third-person brain as causing first-person consciousness, and of first-person consciousness as having causal power over the brain. The concepts ‘caused by’ and ‘causing’ are equally at home in the third-person scientific sense, and in the first-person phenomenological sense. This is just one example of Velmans’ tendency (and he is hardly alone) to presume radical differences between the first- and third-person standpoints, even when there are important points of compatibility.

So from the third-person standpoint, we have (a) overwhelming evidence that consciousness is produced or influenced by something physical. We also have (b) suggestive, but hardly conclusive, evidence that consciousness exerts a causal influence on something physical. Simply given (a), we would predict that consciousness should have a volition-like property, and, conversely, we would have reason to doubt that (a) was the case if consciousness did *not* have a volition-like property.

It may be objected that these third-person conclusions nevertheless depend on the fact that we first had to be acquainted with consciousness as a first-person reality. How can (a) and (b) satisfy conventional third-person scientific criteria of physicality, if, at least indirectly, they are based on our antecedent sense of first-person consciousness? The quick answer is that the third-person mechanisms of science draw on first-person evidence all the time, and this has been the case for literally centuries.¹

(4) To his great credit, Velmans often uses first-person, phenomenological analysis as part of the mix of elements he employs to study consciousness. The heart of his Problem 2 is first-person: ‘One is not conscious of one’s own brain/body processing. So how could there be conscious control of such processing? How conscious is voluntary conscious control? It is surprising how few people bother to ask.’ (p. 8.)

Being among the few who have bothered to ask this question (Mangan, 1991;1993a,b; 2000, 2001), I do take it seriously. According to Velmans, when we actually look at the phenomenology of volition, the contents we find are, to say the least, impoverished. I agree with Velmans that if this is so, we would have strong evidence *against* the hypothesis that consciousness exercises some volitional/control capacity on its own. If there is not enough information *in*

[1] Since this point is so often overlooked, I should note a few instances from actual scientific practice in which first-person evidence was of indisputable value. In the seventeenth century, Newton used the interplay of first-person and third-person standpoints to work out his theory of optics, notably in the distinction between color as a purely subjective phenomena and the objective composition of physical light (see Palmer, 1999, pp. 96–7). Psychophysics, even today the most exacting form of experimental psychology — mathematically *and* experimentally — was founded by Fechner in the nineteenth century to establish the relationships between first- and third-person standpoints. In the early twentieth century, Ewald Hering integrated a wealth of subtle first-person evidence to successfully predict the third-person operation of opponent-process cells in the eye (see Mangan, 1993a).

consciousness — i.e., relevant phenomenological contents — to support a particular control or volitional decision, then I do not see how consciousness itself could be the locus of that decision.

However, it is important to see that this point cuts both ways. If a careful examination of our phenomenology shows that the requisite information *is* there, then, by Velmans' own logic, we have support for the contention that consciousness itself exercises some control over our organism. And coupled with the argument in section (3), we can go further and bring phenomenological analysis to bear on an even larger question — whether or not consciousness is a property of matter.

There is only room here to bring up one example to indicate why I think Velmans sells volitional phenomenology extremely short. Let me contrast Velmans' treatment of hesitation pauses with a more or less parallel analysis by William James.

Velmans considers the phenomenological content of the hesitation pauses we all have when we speak. Without putting too fine a point on it, both Velmans and I would agree that on the assumption that consciousness does have volitional power, hesitation pauses would be a rich source of experiences

associated with the formulation of ideas, deciding which words best express one's meaning, and so forth. If this analysis is correct, conscious planning of what to say should be evident during hesitation pauses — and a little examination of what one experiences during a hesitation pause should settle the matter. Try it. During a hesitation pause, one might experience a certain sense of effort (perhaps the effort to put something in an appropriate way). But nothing is revealed of the *processes* that formulate ideas, translate these into a form suitable for expression in language, search for and retrieve words from memory, or assess which words are most appropriate. . . . The fact that a process demands processing *effort* does not ensure that it is *conscious*. Indeed, there is a sense in which one is only conscious of what one wants to say *after one has said it!* (p. 9, Velmans' emphasis.)

Now consider what James finds in these pauses. Readers can decide for themselves which account is closer to their own experience. James writes:

Has the reader never asked himself what kind of mental fact is his intention of saying a thing before it has been said? . . . How much of it consists of definite sensorial images, either of words or of things? Hardly anything! Linger and the words and the things come to mind, the anticipatory intention, the divination is no more. But as the words that replace them arrive, it welcomes them successfully and calls them right if they agree with it, it rejects them and calls them wrong if they do not (James, 1890, p. 253).

Similar feelings are present, and stay longer, during a tip-of-the-tongue experience:

Suppose we try to recall a forgotten name. The state of our consciousness is peculiar. There is a gap therein; but no mere gap. It is a gap that is intensely active. A sort of a wraith of a name is in it, beckoning us in a particular direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of closeness, and then letting us sink back without the longed for term (*ibid.*, p. 251).

Velmans and James are in substantial agreement about the *sensory* poverty of these pauses. But I would maintain that James' monumental work (James, 1890) shows with virtual certainty that these pauses also contain a vast world of *non-sensory* experiences. *Non-sensory experiences represent precisely the kind of information that consciousness would need if it does exercise voluntary control over its own activity and over non-conscious processing* (Mangan, 1991; 1993a,b; 2001; see especially 2001). So in the brief passages from James above, non-sensory experiences work to represent the gist of what we want to say before we say it, and signal how well the words that we actually speak fit our antecedent intention. In more abstract functional terms, non-sensory experiences at least appear to represent summary context information in consciousness, and mediate voluntary retrieval by providing 'targets' that, in conjunction with shifts in attention, call new information into consciousness.

At any given moment, autonomous conscious processing could only be a very small part of the total information mix determining the content of a particular thought or behaviour. By far the most powerful impact conscious volition has on our organism is cumulative. Hardly anything new can be worked out in any detail at any given moment. So while I believe Velmans is right to presume that hesitation pauses should offer especially good examples of the phenomenology of volition, he presumes that a given pause involves much more complex decisions that I think even remotely possible. On the other hand, even a cursory look at hesitation pauses shows they contain just the sort of complex, systemic conscious representations and retrieval mechanisms that would have to be in consciousness if, per hypothesis, consciousness does exercise some autonomous control over the rest of our organism.

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