The Ignorant Mind

Consciousness as a coping mechanism

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Instelling	**: Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam**
Afstudeervariant en opleiding	**: Scriptie Bacheloropleiding Wijsbegeerte**
Leerstoelgroep	**: Theoretische filosofie**
Aantal studiepunten	**: 10 ECTS**
Datum voltooiing	**: 09-05-2015**
Begeleider	**: T.K.A.M. de Mey**
Adviseur	**: M.M.S.K. Sie**
Aantal woorden:	**: 9787**

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Preface

To each his sufferings: all are men,
Condemn'd alike to groan—
The tender for another's pain,
Th' unfeeling for his own.
Yet, ah! why should they know their fate,
Since sorrow never comes too late,
And happiness too swiftly flies?
Thought would destroy their Paradise.
No more; —where ignorance is bliss,
'Tis folly to be wise.[1]

Every time we wake up, we rise back into consciousness. Be it from sleep, fainting, a sleep inducing anaesthetic in the hospital, or a knock-out punch in the boxing ring. There are many ways to lose consciousness, as we casually say to one another. If one thing, we lose it on a daily basis, only to recover it when we have slept through the night.

It seems simple when put this way. It is not. Consciousness is not something we merely *own*, or find next to our bed on the nightstand. Consciousness is also something that is a state of being. We do not only have consciousness; we are conscious. This should make it easier to pinpoint what consciousness is, how it works and where it comes from. Even if this makes it easier – an assumption that is arguably true – it has not helped us explain the phenomenon in all its aspects.

The aim of this thesis is to clarify the phenomenon that is consciousness. Where does it come from? What is it good for? These are the questions that are vital to this work.

The way I will do this takes us past three thinkers, each with their own ideas about consciousness, what consciousness is, and where it comes from. Each thinker will be discussed in a separate chapter, each of which I begin with a quotation that reflects the general idea in each chapter.

The first is René Descartes (1596 – 1650), the French philosopher who has become famous for his *Meditations* and his 'I think, therefore I am'. His view of the difference between mind and body are typical of the way people speak about the matter; his thinking has resulted in a mind-set that still rules our way of thinking and talking about the mind and consciousness. After this, we will examine the *Multiple Drafts theory of consciousness* as forwarded by Daniel Dennett (1942) in his

[1] Gray, 1742

Consciousness Explained. This will be the body of this work, the theory being very different from the view of consciousness that has sprouted from Descartes's influence – Dennett grounds consciousness in the physical brain and the processes in it.

The third thinker we will examine is Alva Noë (1964) and the way he sees consciousness in his *Out of our Heads*, where he argues that consciousness is not a result of brain activity but rather the result of interaction and communication between individuals and the world around them. I will show that he is in fact not explaining consciousness, but only the creation of a self by a conscious mind.

After discussing three views of consciousness, I will develop a view of my own, drawing on the three views mentioned above and combining important aspects of them. In these, Dennett weighs the heaviest, though without the insights gained from the works of Descartes and Noë, my view would not be complete.

1: The common view

> *First of all, I perceive that there is a big difference between the mind and the body insofar as the body, by its nature, is always divisible whereas the mind is evidently indivisible. (…)it is one and the same mind that wills, senses and understands.*[2]

Between man and other animals, there has always been one feature that, at first glance, seems to distinguish the one from the other. The mind, the ability to think, has led not only to human culture and technology; it has also led man to consider and occasionally classify himself as the 'rational animal'. This power of thought, often considered a privilege, has itself led to the examination of thought. It is a very interesting thing, our mind, and it is not easily examined.

The reason for this is that the mind is not something we can simply grasp. A leg is easily examined; we can see it, hold it. The mind, however, seems to be just for the mind. The mind is what we are; the thinker. The body is what we possess, something we use to navigate through the world. The mind and body are – at face value – different from each other.

It is this question, the 'mind-body' problem, that spawns many thoughts on how the mind and body are able to interact with each other. In our experience the mind always ends up being the decisive entity that steers the body. Where does this come from? And why do we think this way?

1.1: Dualism and doubt

In the seventeenth century AD, the French philosopher René Descartes shaped the everyday view on the mind and body for centuries to come. He conducted his famous thought experiments, in which he doubted every possible thing. Eventually, doubting even God and his own existence, he concluded that, in order to doubt anything, he had to be existing; otherwise he would not be able to think – doubting is a way of thinking. Because of his doubting, he had no other possibility but to conclude that he had to exist as a thinking being.

Following up on his systematic doubt and the clarity of his own existence as a thinking being, he then found his way back, disproving his doubts and proving, by means of 'clear and distinct ideas', the existence of God, himself – not only as a thinking being but also the reality of his body – and the world.

What is interesting, is that he posits two different kinds of substances. One, the visible, touchable substance of the physical world, is what he refers to as the *Res Extensa*. Essentially, this is the

[2] Descartes, 2010: 79-80

substance of which the world is made up; it is the being extensive, the taking up space that is the signifying trait it has. The other is what the mind is made up of; he calls this the *Res Cogitans*, thinking substance, which is exactly what the mind does. It thinks.

This is the way we often think – or at least seem to think – about our consciousness. It is different from the things around us, because it is not easily grasped. It has to be more than the brain, because our minds are so complicated and do not seem like a mere physical effect. In other words, it is almost impossible to *believe* that our conscious mind could be anything less than an entity on its own.

Nowadays, this dualist view of the mind and the body is not popular in science. It is widely accepted that the world does not consist of our everyday regular matter on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the invisible, ungraspable thinking matter. Even knowing this, the feeling that the mind is more than just brain activity is more common than access to internet.

Descartes was on to something. He noticed that the mind is not the same as the brain, heart[3], or any other organ where the mind had been thought to be located. There was a lack of physical evidence and medicine was not advanced enough to allow him to conduct the kind of experimental research we can perform today. Yet after hundreds of years, we still have no conclusive answer to the question what the mind is and where it comes from.

The first step is to tackle dualism. The way to do this is not to disprove it as a way of thinking – we have to welcome it with open arms.

The weirder this sounds, the better. It is not shocking to any of us to think the mind is something different than our body; it comes naturally. It is also normal for us to see a difference between the world around us and our own being. As an individual, life is dualistic in nature, because it is always the self – compared to another – compared to the outside world. Dualism is not a wrong way of thinking, nor is it a ridiculous way of theorizing. Dualism is a natural way for an individual to orientate itself in the world.

Contrary to how ordinary the idea is of the mind being something else than just brain activity, is the – apparently – extraordinary idea that the mind, as consciousness, is indeed nothing more than the aforementioned brain activity. To many, it is unbelievable that the brain is the only source for consciousness, and this makes sense. It is a non-natural way of thinking. Worse, it brings us down from the pedestal high above the animal kingdom which we have settled on; we are no longer a special creature because of our conscious minds.

[3] The mind as part of the soul was thought to be located in the heart by the Stoics. It was, according to them, essentially the faculty in command of the body. See paragraph 5.2 in *Ancient Theories of Soul*

In order to accept dualism and make it work in today's scientific climate, we have to step away from the ethereal[4], supernatural that is associated with consciousness. We have to denounce the existence of souls or spirits and acknowledge that the world accommodates physical matter – and that consciousness is part of that world.

There are two things we must take into account from Descartes' thinking, because they are too basic in the discussion to let them go unnoticed. The first is the fact that indeed, consciousness is more than just activity in the brain. It is too narrow-minded to say that it is; and if it were, we would be able to read thoughts on a brain scan.

The second is the fact that we distinguish between our inner world and the outside world. Everyone does this and we experience both worlds in significantly different ways; the experience of feeling an object hands-on is different from imagining to feel the same object.

[4] Ethereal is a term that generally describes something extremely light or airy; from the Greek αἰθήρ (aether); meaning 'upper' or 'higher air'. It is also used in terms of the otherworldly, extraordinary or supernatural, often associated with the afterlife. I use this term in describing the more general notions of spirits, souls, or thinking substances (such as the *Res Cogitans* as found in Descartes' thinking) to emphasize their non-physical nature.

2: Multiple Drafts

> *For appreciation, you need consciousness – something no mere machine has. But of course the brain* is *a machine of sorts, an organ like the heart or lungs or kidneys with an ultimately mechanical explanation of all its powers.*[5]

In this chapter we will look into the theory forwarded by Daniel Dennett, the 'Multiple Drafts theory of consciousness'. It provides us with an explanation of how the conscious mind comes to be. This chapter is intended to bring the reader off of the – almost sentimental – view of the mind as an 'individual' residing in the brain and set a course to thinking about consciousness in a more physical sense. This will open the way to seeing consciousness as something less than the heavenly gift it is often portrayed as, though something intriguing nonetheless.

Our brains allow us to be conscious. The brain is the place where consciousness 'is'. And taking into account that we identify ourselves with who we are on a conscious level, I dare to say that we are our brains. To many, this seems impossible. It is as if the brain might as well have nothing to do with consciousness, because it is almost unimaginable – and certainly difficult to imagine – that we are conscious only because of our brain. Surely, there is more to consciousness than that.

What we find in the debate on human consciousness and the mind-body problem is actually pointing in that direction. Most likely, it seems, the brain is that which allows for consciousness, creates consciousness. Should the brain cease to work, consciousness would no longer exist. It is hard to prove otherwise. Every human being that is conscious also has a brain. To remove the brain would kill the human being in question, leaving us without an answer to the question whether consciousness is to be found in the brain. However, removing the heart would yield the same result.

Next to those morbid thought experiments, over the course of time it has come to the surface that damage to the brain can significantly alter a person's behaviour and personality. Brain death is a diagnosis that points to bodies we can keep alive by feeding them and pumping blood and air around, but consciousness is – so far as it is visible in responses and reactions to stimuli – gone.

Today it is widely accepted that consciousness is in the head, in the brain. From there, we send out electric signals to our limbs so we can move. From our extremities, signals are sent through the nerves to the brain, resulting in perception and sensation. Brain activity can be measured when we think about certain things. Under the impression that our consciousness is in our brains, Daniel

[5] Dennett, 1993: 31

Dennett has come up with a possible explanation. He calls this the 'Multiple Drafts model of consciousness', a way of thinking that rests on the assumption that consciousness is solely built out of brain activity.

He states the following:

> The brain *is* (my italics) Headquarters, the place where the ultimate observer is, but there is no reason to believe that the brain itself has any deeper headquarters, any inner sanctum, arrival at which is the necessary or sufficient condition for conscious experience. In short, there is no observer *inside* (my italics) the brain.[6]

He means to say that there is no such thing as the *Res Cogitans* we find in Descartes' work, nor is there a special place where consciousness happens, or where the two substances Descartes postulated could interact. What we see here is a statement that denies the existence of the non-physical mind – or soul, spirit, 'ghost in the machine' – and attributes consciousness completely to the physical brain.

That quickly de-romanticizes the image of the conscious mind. It is not something special, ethereal, that sets human beings apart from the entirety of the world around us because we would be the only beings able to connect with this invisible substance of thought. After all, animals have brains in their heads too. Knowing this, the only thing that would set us apart from these animals – consciousness – had to be something extraordinary, something to set us apart from other creatures.

Animals have brains, and even more so, their brains seem to have functions similar to our own.

> The brain's task is to guide the body it controls through a world of shifting conditions and sudden surprises, so it must gather information from that world and use it swiftly to "produce future" –to extract anticipations in order to stay one step ahead of disaster.[7]

This is how a dog can catch a ball, or Frisbee. How a cat always lands on its feet. How human beings think ahead not only in a game of chess, but also in walking through a crowded train station. This similarity between human brains and the brains of other animals is something that shows we are using our brain not only to think in abstract ways. There are also the 'animalistic' functions the brain has that still work through in our consciousness.

[6] Dennett, 1993: 106
[7] Dennett, 1993: 144

For those who seem adamant to maintain the assumption that animals cannot be conscious like human beings, there is no need to worry. Even though there is no special entity that embodies our conscious minds, animal brains have evolved differently from human brains. It is still possible to hold that human beings are conscious and animals are not; more specifically, the human brain is likely the only brain to be capable of reflecting on itself.

2.1: A rough sketch

The Multiple Drafts model is not a very common view of consciousness and where it comes from. In order to understand how the model works, a short sketch of the foundation is required. This sketch is a crude abstraction of the actual brain; its intricacies are too many to describe. It does, however, provide an explanation of *how* the brain deals with information.

The first thing we need to understand is the fact that the mind is the result of the physical events happening in the brain. Neural activity is solely responsible for consciousness and the ability of thought; without the brain, there is no consciousness. Second, we have to see that there is no certain point or place in the brain where 'consciousness happens'. Consciousness is not located in a certain gland, or a certain part of the cortex.

These two suppositions give rise to the idea that consciousness is not found in a certain place inside the brain, but 'is created' in multiple places in the brain.

> There is no single, definitive "stream of consciousness," … Instead of such a single stream (however wide), there are multiple channels in which specialist circuits try, in parallel pandemoniums, to do their various things, creating Multiple Drafts as they go.[8]

Different systems in the brain, responsible for different actions or impressions from the senses all create 'parallel drafts of consciousness', that may never reach the actual conscious mind. These drafts are not finished works – they simply are put out by certain parts of the brain to be evaluated by other parts. It can best be understood as if a writer sends out a first draft to multiple proof-readers, all of whom then create their own draft by making corrections and suggestions. These drafts, or 'pre-conscious' modes of consciousness, are the building blocks of our conscious mind, and only some of these reach our conscious minds. Most of the drafts disappear or get integrated in others, never actually coming to expression in the conscious mind.

[8] Dennett, 1993: 253-254

When multiple systems in the brain work parallel to each other, creating output that goes on to be either combined with other output, discarded, or changed – 'edited' – by other systems on the basis of input that has reached those systems, many things happen at once. In describing how this works, we describe purely physical events in the brain by speaking of the information they carry in them. This means that although we do not know exactly which certain pulse in the brain carries which concrete data, there is the possibility to simplify and speak of certain pieces of information that are present in either the consciousness or the pre-consciousness.

Skipping ahead to one of the major implications of the Multiple Drafts theory of consciousness will help understand the thinking behind it better. Simply put, the brain is the organ that deals with information processing. Most of the information is dealt with and will not reach the conscious mind at all, though it has been processed in a pre-conscious manner. Some information does reach the conscious mind, coming to the fore in our thoughts and memories. The pre-conscious is a part of this information processing – it is where most of the 'drafts' are created and discarded.

Dennett does not state pre-consciousness happens before consciousness or even before post-consciousness (memory). According to the model, these things all happen at the same time, a constant changing, coming, and going of different thoughts before they are conscious, while they are in the conscious mind and when they are in our memories. The brain is quickly adapting to new impressions, coping with the quickly changing surroundings of the body it is part of. Because of this, drafts of consciousness are changed in different circuits at different moments, all happening very fast and creating the illusion of a conscious mind that is constantly aware and creates a sense of self[9].

The pre-conscious is hard to grasp because it never is actually conscious; the example of a computer running software in the background (pre-conscious) while another programme runs on screen (conscious) could be as close as we can get to a metaphor. Dennett writes:

> Our brains …, weren't designed(…) for word processing, but now a large portion – perhaps even the lion's share – of the activity that takes place in adult human brains is involved in a sort of word processing: speech production and comprehension, and the serial rehearsal and rearrangement of linguistic items, or better, their neural surrogates.[10]

[9] Dennett uses 'self' as a term that encompasses everything associated with an individual conscious mind and is in short a 'model the agent has of itself' (see Dennett, 1993, pages 426-427)
[10] Dennett, 1993: 225

This word processing comparison is helping the explanation in two ways. The first is that similar to the way computers were initially designed to deal with numbers and math problems, later (re-)programming has changed them to be able to perform a multitude of different tasks, such as word processing. Though the abilities of the computer seem changed, the hardware has not, in effect, changed. In short, it is possible to have new software run on old systems; we run word processing on systems in the brain (as an information processer) that evolved to serve different purposes, yet adapted to language over the course of centuries.

The second way holds that in a computer system, there still are numerous numeric and binary processes running in the background, all making it possible for words to show up on a screen when we enter them on the keyboard; much like pinching someone's skin and their reaction being to shout 'ouch'. This tells us that the information we get when speaking to people is not like the information they have in their brain; it only seems like we think in words and sentences when in reality, we have little discharges running through different parts of the brain. These processes in the brain reveal themselves to us – are understood by us – as words. This is not an activity performed by these neural charges, turning themselves into something we can identify as a word or letter; the words are a way for the brain to cope with the dazzling amount of information it has to process every instant.

The 'coding' or representing of information by the brain – turning thoughts into words and images, things we 'understand' – are only a coping mechanism. The structure and complexity of the brain is too much to get a grip on, which is what makes the exploration of human consciousness all the more difficult.

2.2: Implications

The implications of Dennett's model seem to have no influence on the actual consciousness. The first thing to acknowledge is that the model *has* no influence on consciousness or on how it comes into being; the model is a description of how consciousness works, which Dennett bases on empirical studies in different fields of science.

What we see is that consciousness is not located in a central place in the brain. It is an effect of physical activity all across the brain. Much that happens in the brain does not actually make it to conscious thought. These are the basic 'rules' of Dennett's theory.

The only implications of the theory have to do with how we think about consciousness, and in that discussion Dennett has upturned a lot of soil. The question he asks are not just about how consciousness comes into existence, but also how we see consciousness. Under the influence of advancing empirical science, it is becoming harder to deny that the mind is a result of brain activity.

One striking example Dennett draws on is the blind spot in our eyes and how this is seemingly filled in by our brain. "One of the most striking features of consciousness is its discontinuity – as revealed in the blind spots, and saccadic gaps, to take the simplest examples."[11] The absence of receptors in the eye that causes the blind spot is usually compensated for with a second eye; we do not notice the blind spot. We can show it when we cover one eye – because that leaves the brain without the additional information from the second eye. He continues, writing: "The discontinuity of consciousness is striking because of the *apparent* (my italics) continuity of consciousness."[12]

The cause for this seeming continuity in our consciousness is the way we are not sensitive to many kinds of changes – we only notice certain kinds of changes. Many things happen around us and the brain seems to ignore a lot of things, instead of trying to take in all the tiny changes around us. Because we do *not consciously* notice many things around us, we seem to be experiencing a constant flow of input. Even though we do have this constant input, we do experience it differently than we think. The pre-conscious is where everything gets filtered; only those impressions that the brain deems important are eventually able to reach the conscious state. This allows the brain to be more efficient in its task of leading the body through the ever changing environment around it and at the same time keeps the mind from flooding with impressions that are not of great importance.

A consequence of Dennett's view of consciousness and the mind is that it takes away a lot of the mystic air that surrounds consciousness. This is the first step into explaining how consciousness works; the idea that the mind is something not physical has to be cast aside if we are to find the mechanics behind the workings of the brain.

> Thousands of memes, mostly borne by language, but also by wordless "images" and other data structures, take up residence in an individual brain, shaping its tendencies and thereby turning it into a mind.[13]

The memes are not represented by actual memes in the brain; in the pure mechanics of how it works the memes are discharging neurons in patterns, circuits or a combination of those. The memes have to come from somewhere, however, before they can take up residence in the brain. In the next chapter, we will venture further from the brain and outward to its surroundings, expanding consciousness.

[11] Dennett, 1993: 356
[12] Dennett, 1993: 356
[13] Dennett, 1993: 254

3: Stepping out

> You are not your brain. We are not locked up in a prison of our own ideas and sensations. The phenomenon of consciousness, like that of life itself, is a world-involving dynamic process. (…) We are out of our heads.[14]

This chapter revolves around the idea forwarded by Alva Noë that roughly states that our conscious mind cannot be the result of our brain, and how this can be unified with the idea that we are, as a conscious mind, our brain. Though Noë claims that we are not our brains, I will argue that his theory can exist alongside this notion and, moreover, would benefit from blending together with it. In the process of bringing these together, we have to both reject the notion that we are not our brain, and embrace the idea that our conscious self is not found in our heads.

It sounds strange, counterintuitive. How can we be our brain when at the same time, we are not? In order to understand this, we have to look at Noë's theory more closely. He tries to find a way in which we can be content to reject the idea that we are our brain; in this he clings desperately to the idea of a special 'something' that sets us apart from the rest of nature.

Noë's idea rests upon the foundation that is 'meaning'; he aims for meaning when he explains what allows us to be conscious, to make us a person. There is no reason to deny any such claim, since humans are social primates and depend on communication between individuals. Meaning is a valuable good between people.

Noë takes this abstract concept of meaning and claims it is what makes up consciousness.[15] It is certainly not a wrong thought to found consciousness on meaning, seeing that our conscious minds are constantly struggling with the meaning of words (in both writing and speaking) and other audio-visual input, accompanied with sensory stimuli. Our brain receives input – information – and has to deal with that in order to trigger a response, be it in the shape of a speech act or physical movement, perhaps not responding at all. This means that the information has some kind of meaning to the brain in order for it to respond appropriately.

Therein lies the strength behind Noë's thought. The relations between individuals and the circumstances which they are immersed in determine to a large extent the way each person behaves. This is not a reason to accept the idea that we are not our brains; this is a reason to

[14] Noë, 2009: xiii

[15] Ever since Brentano (1838 – 1917), many philosophers have considered the distinguishing feature of consciousness to be "intentionality".

acknowledge that the brain deals with information as much as it attributes meaning to this information.

Noë places consciousness in the relation of intentionality, meaning; without meaning consciousness does not exist. Yet, also, without consciousness, meaning cannot exist. It seems paradoxical at first. Both meaning and consciousness seem to presuppose one another, relying on each other to be the first condition needed for their existence. Meaning is an important word when one speaks of consciousness, mostly because meaning is what consciousness deals with. It is not, however, something that existed before consciousness, nor will meaning exist when no more conscious beings are around to interpret it.

> The world shows up for us thanks to our interaction with it. It is not made in the brain or by the brain. It is there for us and we have access to it. What makes it the case that my thoughts are directed to this task (…) or to this object (…) is not the intrinsic nature of my internal computational states.[16]

Noë claims this is another reason why consciousness is a "world-involving, dynamic process"[17]. That reason, in turn, is one he uses to state that we are not our brains, that we are not locked up in our heads.

The idea that consciousness is a world-involving process, however, is not at all a reason to conclude that we are not our brains. To see that the 'intrinsic nature of internal computational states', as he calls it, is not to direct thoughts at certain things, only backs the claim that the brain is what creates consciousness; it has developed beyond its original purpose and therefore beyond its intrinsic nature, and is now capable of directing thoughts at certain things. Quickly looking at Dennett's reasoning, there is, as I described earlier, the complexity of the brain that we can see as 'new software' running on 'old hardware'. New language-processing in an older cranial structure.

When Noë writes about the brain and its 'nature', he forgets that the human brain has evolved far beyond its original functions. Humans have a larger cranial capacity to accommodate their larger brains; far larger than our ancestors'. As often happens, the mistake he makes is to underestimate the complexity and capabilities of the human brain.

The idea that consciousness is the 'self', something that comes naturally to our thinking about it (e.g. 'I' am conscious) still permeates the ideas Noë develops. He tries to show that "(…) it

[16] Noë, 2009: 164. When Noë writes that the world is 'there for us', he seems to say that we (conscious humans) are not a part of this world or in a way entitled to ownership of the world. This claim is illustrative of the pedestal consciousness still stands on as a 'gift of god' that sets humankind apart from the world. Let it be clear that we are just as much a part of the physical world as everything else in the world that we interact with.

[17] See note 14

[consciousness] is something we achieve. Consciousness is more like dancing than it is like digestion."[18] Consciousness is something one does, it seems. We are not conscious, though we create our consciousness in order to *be* conscious. Yet, like dancing, we are supposed to be aware of ourselves while we are in fact creating this awareness. If our conscious self could actually pull this off, we would certainly know *how* we achieved consciousness. After all, we are doing it all the time.

We have to get rid of the selfish way we think about consciousness. It is not something we achieve, like performing a coordinated dance; if it were we would know how we did it. Here, Dennett throws us a rope:

> (…) selves are not independently existing soul-pearls, but artifacts of the social processes that create us, and, like other such artifacts, subject to sudden shifts in status. The only "momentum" that accrues to the trajectory of a self, or a club, is the stability imparted to it by the web of beliefs that constitute it (…)[19]

The self, that conscious being with all its hopes, dreams, wishes, and thoughts, is only a self where the beliefs it is surrounded by allow for it to be a self. A wish only means so much, can only be a wish, as long as the belief system it is made in also allows for that wish to be a wish under actual circumstances. This self, like consciousness, is made up of different strands of 'meaning', carried over by other individuals that recognise one's self *as a self.*

One is a *self* because other individuals have multiple views of the self in question, all contributing to this self and how it stands in the web of beliefs and the physical world around it. Noë tries to say that consciousness is not in our brains and that we are not our brains. Instead, he provides us with an account of how consciousness is formed in the relations and interactions with others around us, with the world outside. In his account, he merely provides us with an idea of how a *self* is created; an identity assumed by a conscious mind, and forced upon it by other minds.

This is where the difference lies between thinking about consciousness and thinking about the self. Such a self is not 'consciousness' but the product of a conscious mind that is forced to set itself apart from other such minds. It is solely based on *meaning* and the assumption that with a self comes consciousness.

[18] Noë, 2009: xii
[19] Dennett, 1993: 423

3.1: Coming up short

At the end of his *Out of our Heads,* Noë provides us with a definition of consciousness:

> If we are to understand consciousness – the fact that we think and feel and that a world shows up for us – we need to turn our backs on the orthodox assumption that consciousness is something that happens inside us, like digestion.[20]

The most striking part in it is the notion that consciousness is a fact. To add to this, it is '*the* (my italics) fact that we think, feel, and that a world shows up *for* (my italics) us'. This, together with the idea that consciousness does not happen inside us in a way like digestion, is not doing justice to consciousness.

The three aspects of consciousness named are arguably characteristic to consciousness. The first, thinking – which is a broad term – can be assumed to happen in a conscious mind. Feeling – the second – too, is done in a conscious manner in the sense that one is aware of physical sensations.

Noë pertains that the world shows up for us; this third aspect is troubling in two ways. In the sense that it (the world) is there *for* us, he is being a megalomaniac; the world is not there just for humankind to enjoy it. In the sense that it (the world) shows up, he is lazy; we actively perceive the world around us – the action is *ours*, not the world's (albeit in a sense that we are part of the world). This also seems conflicting with the notion that consciousness does not happen inside us like digestion does; if the world does all the work of showing up to us – and this is part of what Noë sees as consciousness – then consciousness is not something we 'achieve like dancing'[21].

Noë seems to forget about the one aspect of *being* conscious that is what allows for speaking about consciousness in the first place. Just as Descartes at the beginning of his *Meditations* makes clear what he understands as a substance – that is, created by God and incorruptible in nature, only existing by the grace of the God that created it[22] – so too does Noë need to have a clear view of consciousness.

It is ridiculous, therefore, to forget that the most important aspect that sets consciousness apart from 'awareness' (like that of a fish being able to respond to its surroundings) is the ability of self-reflection. The 'being aware that one is aware' – self-consciousness – is a crucial aspect of consciousness.

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[20] Noë, 2009: 186. This definition can also be found on page 3 in the same text, where he writes: *"… consciousness – appreciate the fact that we feel and think and that the world shows up for us – …"* On page 8 he refers to consciousness as 'experience', only to attribute the same definition to this term. It is fair to say that in using the same definition in the beginning and end of his text, this is what Noë holds as consciousness.

[21] See note 18

[22] Descartes, 2010: 6-7

3.2: Back to square one

Noë shows that meaning and relations between individuals are of vital importance for what he calls consciousness. I have shown that this way of thinking leads not to an explanation of consciousness but instead shows that interaction between individuals creates a certain sense of self, and that his conception of consciousness is one that does not do justice to the phenomenon we call consciousness.

His view on consciousness is predominated with the irrational fear that the essence of his being is not the immortal soul, holding the ethereal ability to think and, without corporeality, still influencing a corporeal body in the material realm that is our world. As irrational as this fear may be, it is certainly understandable. When one is raised to believe that consciousness is something special, setting humans apart from not only the animal kingdom, but especially proving us to be more intelligent than our distant primate cousins, it is hard to accept that we are conscious only because our brain is so complex that it is able to create consciousness on its own, not employing the help of an immortal soul.

This is precisely one of his stronger points – not in his own theorizing but in showing that the meaning attributed to the surrounding world and the interaction between others are of vital importance in shaping a conscious mind. The brain works with information and is taught in infancy and childhood by others to understand speech and writing, among other things.

Going back to square one is not a step back or a game lost; it is rethinking consciousness, armed with the lesson learned in Noë's work. The conscious mind remains the largest source of information for other, younger (e.g. children's) minds and in its teaching, it shapes them. "It [the conscious mind] is the ultimate arbiter of why anything matters."[23]

[23] Dennett, 1993: 31

4: Bringing it together

> For I thought that it did not belong in any way to the nature of body to have a power to move itself, any more than it has the power of sensing or thinking. In fact, I was surprised to find such powers in certain bodies.[24]

We have so far examined three different ways to think about consciousness. All three seem to oppose each other, yet they all aim to explain the same phenomenon in their own way. From the dualistic Descartes, the materialistic (or informationalist) Dennett, and the externalistic Noë, we come to a point where none of these explanations seem to be enough to grasp what consciousness is. The aim of this chapter is to bring together the three different views and make a clearer picture of what creates consciousness. Let us begin by examining again why Noë wants us to 'get out of our heads'. He writes: "We are not locked up in a prison of our own ideas and sensations."[25]

This seems clear, since humans have the ability to, as he says, 'access the world that appears before us'[26]. His notion that consciousness is *outside* of the body, however, only applies to the meaning of thoughts and not to where consciousness is created. As I have argued in the previous chapter, the reliance on meaning and the outside world, disregarding the brain in the discussion about consciousness, only leads to a theory of how we come to a notion of a *self* among others.

The self that we find there, however, is of importance to our notion of consciousness. Though it may have little to do with the actual realization of the conscious mind, it is an indicator of the function that adheres to consciousness. The self is a way for the brain to cope with the abundance of impressions it receives from the senses and allows for a clearer picture in dealing with the surroundings of the body that holds the brain. This self that we find when following Noë's reasoning is the self that we find in Descartes's dualism.

Descartes uses the notion of a self, the 'I', if you like, to conduct his meditations. He identifies himself as such a self. A self which is distinct from every other being or self – Descartes is Descartes. In that sense, he sets the self apart from the 'outside world'.

The next important step is to unite the exercise of finding the meaning that consciousness deals with in the way we find it in Noë's work with Cartesian dualism. Taking the distinction between the self and the others, me and everything outside, and combining this with the idea of meaning being

[24] Descartes, 2010: 19
[25] See note 14
[26] Noë, 2009: 164

transferred between other individuals such as myself, it is clear that the observation of the self is not such a strange one. After all, it is I who is dealing with the information that comes to me from outside.

Seeing this dualistic self appear is not enough to explain where consciousness comes from. The notion of a spirit that steers the body is unacceptable next to the idea that the brain is where consciousness 'happens' – the self is only an abstraction to help the brain cope with information that it processes.

That is where Dennett's theory comes in. He explains not so much consciousness as a phenomenon, but analyses the workings of the brain and then tries to show that the brain is not as structured as it seems to the conscious mind. Instead of a 'single stream of consciousness' – which is the way our consciousness seems to be – the brain is creating multiple versions of what is to become consciousness, leaving out many details in the final version and including only those that are deemed relevant to the situation.

The brain handles information coming from the sensory organs and sends out information in response; the consciousness that we experience is a result of the activity in the brain. "Thousands of memes,(…), take up residence in an individual brain, shaping its tendencies and thereby turning it into a mind."[27]

Knowing that the brain is an almost chaotic, multi-layered organ that processes information quickly with an interest to preserving the body that it is part of and thereby preserving itself, it follows that the main focus of the brain is the *outside* of the body in order to keep it intact. The memes that 'take up residence' are coming from outside[28]. These memes are also *turning the brain into a mind*. The mind is, by taking in the memes, internalizing the outside world and attributing meaning to it – at the same time the nature of humankind, to live in communities, compels the brain to share the meaning it internalizes with others.

This internalization of the outside world by attributing meaning is what makes the brain – mind – create a *self* in order to distinguish this self from the world and the other individuals around it. It builds up an identity within a system of meaning that is a frame of reference; in such a system of meaning each mind has a place where it is positioned; it builds itself a niche.

For the mind to become conscious, then, it is necessary that a mind, within its frame of reference and meaning, actually makes the notion of being a self and wondering what that self is. It is no longer only aware of its surroundings and focused on the outside, but repurposes the mind – or at least part of it – to reflect on the notion of *its own position* in the web of meaning that surrounds

[27] Dennett, 1993: 254

[28] This follows from 'taking up residence'; just as a person can only take up residence in a place where said person is not yet a resident, so can a meme only take up residence in a brain in which it is not yet present.

it. Therein lies the key to consciousness – the egocentric turn of a brain that is built to manoeuvre through an ever-changing environment, redirecting its perspective from the outside to the inside.

The conscious mind is a mind which is aware of being a mind focused on the environment in which it and its body are positioned and deriving meaning from this environment. The difference between a mind and a conscious mind is almost trivial, but one of vital importance in understanding the workings of consciousness. The trouble in understanding the difference, however, lies in the impossible task for a conscious mind to understand what it is to be 'just a mind' – being aware of the surroundings and able to reflect on them, manoeuvring a body through them, yet not ever aware that it is aware. Indeed, the mere idea of being aware but not 'knowing' that one is aware, seems impossible.

Should it become clear how a mind can be not-conscious[29] – unable to spin a *self* for itself and identify itself as fundamentally different from its environment, thereby positioning itself in the web of meaning that is ultimately its own creation – only then can the difference be truly understood.

Dennett gives an account of how the brain has developed routines on different circuits to give rise to more complex functions, ultimately resulting in a multitude of processes that together constitute the mind and consciousness.[30] Opposed to Descartes's thinking, the conscious mind is not an ethereal substance that happens to be able to think, inhabiting a body in the physical world, but a result of the processes in the brain that make up consciousness. Nonetheless, in line with Descartes, there is a distinction between the *self* and the environment that promotes a dualistic view of said self in being conscious in an environment that is not.

Noë teaches us that the conscious mind is not a given, but something that is achieved; the act of finding meaning in a meaningless environment requires the activity that we find as a necessary foundation for consciousness in Dennett's thought, though the act of finding and dealing with meaning alone is not enough for consciousness as such – it only leads to spinning a self when the brain has become a mind that is able to do so[31].

Dennett's consciousness is fragmented, characterized by discontinuity that is masked by arbitrary focusing and leaving out details that the mind deems irrelevant. A conscious mind is able to spin a self, something that is a by-product of consciousness and not a requirement for it; the self is a way for the mind to cope with the awareness of being aware and creates a self to 'posit a unified

[29] 'Unconscious' would be a wrong term to use since it hints at the once being and possibly returning to being consciousness of the mind in question. I make use of this term to keep this distinction clear.
[30] Dennett sketches a hypothetical history of human consciousness and how it evolved in chapter 7: *The evolution of consciousness* of his *Consciousness Explained.*
[31] The mind being able to do so means that it has to be of a certain complexity that allows it to perform the processes that constitute consciousness.

agent'[32] to itself and others. The result is a 'sense of self' that Noë sees as the conscious mind when he explains his theory of meaning and interaction that does not constitute consciousness but gives the mind enough to find a niche to position the self it creates.

4.1: Bundled strength

We have by now seen three explanations of how, in varying degrees, consciousness comes into being. Descartes based his entire world on the premise that the only thing he could not doubt was his ability to think consciously, although his explanation of consciousness does not go much further than naming a thinking substance that supposedly exists alongside physical substance.

Dennett relies on the physical world and grounds the conscious mind in the brain; according to his thought, the mind is the brain. Noë, on the other hand, claims that consciousness is to be looked for where meaning is and interaction takes place; between individuals.

This is the point where I sketch out my view of what consciousness is, using the work of Dennett as the foundation for the mind but expanding his thought by involving the meaning we adhere to the things around us and the dualism which he dreads.

The first step is the brain. It is there that consciousness is formed and without it, consciousness, a mind, or even awareness would be impossible. There is no way around the squishy grey matter in our skulls.

Following Dennett in his theory, I agree that the brain becomes a mind; our information processor takes in information that shapes our thinking. Multiple processes run at the same time – some become conscious, most do not. In the complexity of the brain, Dennett sees the capability of the organ to become a mind. He sees the capability of a mind complex enough to be a conscious one.

However, in order to become a mind, the brain needs input to work with. This is where Noë gives us a hand. The information, the interaction, the meaning; those are things we cannot find within our brain's stores. In order to become a mind and in order to become conscious, the brain needs to interact with the world around it. As social beings, humans have an advantage; they are inclined to interaction with others for the survival of the group. This interaction is not only what triggers the development of the mind in a brain, but it also triggers the development of a self, and consciousness shortly thereafter.

Interaction with others is what enables us to spin a self. Even more so does it force us to spin a self. In groups of humans, it is necessary to distinguish one from another. This is the ground for not

[32] Dennett, 1993: 418

only social conventions – like marriage or parent-child relations, ethics – but also for a self. If one lives in a social group consisting of individuals of the same species, identity becomes necessary in the daily interactions with one another. Creating meaning in communication and acting according to meaning relayed to others, first creates an image of an individual in the mind of others; they are oriented outward in their awareness. The interaction with others – who all have an awareness of each other – makes it possible to feed the information back to the individual in question – forcing it to reflect on itself and directing its focus inward as much as outward.

Only then does the 'I' become something that has meaning to one's own mind and in this development we do find the step from a mind to a conscious one.

Indeed, in interaction with the outside world and information and meaning being fed back to us, do we become conscious. This presupposes the brain – it is to become a mind before it can become conscious. In order to become a mind, it has to be complex in structure and workings in order to accommodate for the delicate processes that make up a mind. What this shows, is that the evolution from awareness to a mind to a conscious mind did not happen overnight; it happened slowly.[33]

This line of thought – the combination of Dennett's thinking with that of Noë – leaves room for Descartes' dualism. Not in the way he intended. Descartes has to be adapted to modern science and contemporary thinking.

The way to do this is to revisit one of his assumptions. There are two substances, according to Descartes, one is the material substance, the other is the thinking substance. The thinking substance, in our case, is the brain itself; embedded in the material by means of the body. It is still a material substance, that we cannot deny. However, it is the only substance we know of that is able to think.

This argument is a little forced and seems redundant to the point I am trying to make. However, I have before mentioned that the *self,* as it is, is a way to cope with the complexity of the brain and our surroundings. Descartes has provided us with a vital clue in the debate about consciousness with his dualistic view of the world. There are two points to this.

[33] Dennett describes this in chapter 7 of *Consciousness Explained*, specifically the paragraph 3: *Evolution in brains, and the Baldwin effect (pages 182-187),* the focus on gene-theory and mutations in the brain seen as favourable being passed on more often than not. This account of the evolution of consciousness is heavily influenced by natural selection theory, also favouring the mutations that benefit the individual and the species most.

First of all, there is the point that however we interact with each other, in speaking of the mind we have the feeling that the mind, in fact, *is* different from anything else around us.[34]

Second, the self as a way of coping with our complex surroundings also makes us think with that self as a foundation; there is *me*, and there is the *world*. The brain, in creating the self, creates dualism with it; another coping mechanism. In other words: why do we think of the conscious mind as an individual entity that can think and steer the body it inhabits? Because we are wired to think that way; that is how we cope with the world, with the abundance of impressions that we get from it.

Consciousness, then, also is a way of coping with the complex world around us. It is an evolved quality of the brain, allowing us to navigate more safely through the ever-changing environment and increasing chances of survival. This consciousness is different from the one Noë describes because it comes from the basis that the brain is the mind; it is different from Dennett's consciousness because it is not solely directed outward like the mind is, but has a focus inward as well.

Altogether, I envision a consciousness that is as fragmented as it is complex; not continuous, operating on many different levels at once. Consciousness is, in this sense, a by-product of brain activity. It requires a brain so complex that it is able to interact with an environment[35] that is ever-changing and more complex than the brain itself. Consciousness is the result of simplification; making the world easier to effectively grasp.

The brain has to guide the body through the world,[36] and in order to do so efficiently, it has to be quick in assessing situations. Many things escape our consciousness because the brain makes the world simpler than it is.

In its complexity, the brain is able to become a mind, become conscious. Consciousness is a further simplification, for the benefit of making the abundance of impressions we get less intimidating and more graspable. Consciousness is a phenomenon that shows us the complexity of the brain as it tries to simplify the complexity of both the brain and the world.

[34] It is different in the sense that it can think; not in the sense that it is in fact a different kind of matter than found in the physical world.
[35] I have said that the brain needs to interact with its environment in order to achieve consciousness before. This solely means that it interacts with the environment *through* the body; it is, after all, part of the body to begin with.
[36] See note 7.

Conclusion

I have discussed three different positions in the debate on consciousness in this thesis, and I have forwarded my own, combining key points and building on them. Though Descartes may come off as radical in positing two substances, Dennett in focusing on brain activity and Noë because he disregards the brain, my own position is not radical in the literal sense. I have sketched a middle ground, combining some aspects of the other theories and disregarding others, forging them all to a new view of consciousness.

I do, however, see my view as a radical one in the sense that it is a return to what is essentially dualism; a way of thought that has been out of fashion in philosophy for some time, ushered out by the advances in empirical sciences. Another aspect of my view that I had to point out because others have overlooked it, is the fact that consciousness is a way of simplifying the world and our brain activity.

Based on the brain and the interaction with the world, consciousness is a piece of equipment we have in order to be able to keep ourselves safe. Consciousness is hard to understand because the process that creates it is hidden by consciousness itself, taking up the attention of the individual.

Consciousness keeps us ignorant of most of our surroundings, only focussing on the things that change, the things that are potentially harmful or those that are promising to be beneficial to the continued existence of our individual beings. Consciousness is making our lives easier by pre-selecting the impressions that matter and taking only those into account; we ignore most of our surroundings, giving us more time to focus on other things.

Ignorance is, indeed, bliss.[37]

[37] See note 1.

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