4 The First-Person View of the Mind

Introduction

The first-person viewpoint is based on introspection, where the individual turns his attention *inward* to examine his *own* mind. This is the ultimate personal experience: What am I thinking and feeling? Why do I enjoy the taste of an apple? How do I recognize the face of a friend? And the most important question we ask ourselves: What am I? It is the self examination of one's experiences, feelings, and thoughts. It is the mind perceiving itself. In this chapter we focus on five of the most striking aspects of the mind as seen by introspection: *qualia*, *mental unity*, *semantic thought*, *present tense*, and *free-will*. These and similar characteristics are the heart of the first-person view of the mind. Most important, all of these things are irreducible; they cannot be broken into components. Therefore, as seen from the first-person viewpoint, the mind is one or more Elements-of-reality.

How We Discuss Consciousness

The first-person view of the mind is private; the individual alone has access to his innermost thoughts and experiences. No one can enter the consciousness of another. This is a formidable obstacle to our study of the mind. How can we communicate about things that are known only in this personal and private way? To answer this question, imagine you are thrust into a foreign land with those around you speaking an unfamiliar language. How do you convey your thoughts? The answer is, *you point*. If you want to eat, you point at food and then your mouth. If you want to leave, you point at yourself and then the

door. Pointing allows us to indicate what object we are referring to without having to describe the object in more detail.

This is the same way that we discuss our introspective experience. It would be easier if we could physically point at these things with our finger, but in most cases this isn't possible. Our introspective pointing is primarily done with language. For instance, consider the phrase: *the redness of red*. These words point to a particular thing seen from the first-person viewpoint. Most of us know what this refers to, because we have directly experienced it. Likewise, we expect others to understand it in the same way, from their personal experience. No one can tell another what the *redness of red* is. You either know about it from direct experience, or you know nothing about it at all. Either way, the words *redness of red* do not define the thing; they only point to something that we may or may not already be aware of.

Communicating in this way has obvious limitations. First, it requires that both parties already know the thing being pointed at. For instance, you cannot discuss the beauty of a sunset with one who is blind, or the pleasure of a child's laugh with one who is deaf. Second, language itself is an imperfect tool. As an example of this, imagine asking several people to describe a physical object, such as a book. Even though they are referring to the same thing, there will be a considerable difference in the language they use. This problem becomes worse when the thing being described is nonphysical, such as a "political party," or a "computer program." Trying to describe what is seen from the first-person perspective is perhaps the worst of all. Even if two people had an identical introspective experience, they would probably describe it differently.

This brings up the third and most perplexing problem in communicating about our first-person knowledge. How do we know that others are having the same introspective experience that we are? Suppose you and a friend look at a clear sky and simultaneously proclaim, "what a wonderful shade of blue." You are both experiencing something, and have agreed to call

your respective experiences by the same name. This seems reasonable, since both of your experiences correspond to the same physical object. But this does not guarantee that you are having the same experience. Suppose that your friend had surgery at birth to switch the blue and green neural pathways between his eyes and brain. When he now looks at the sky, he experiences what you would call "green." However, he calls it "blue" simply because that is the name he has been taught.

Taking this example a step further, now imagine that *everyone* has their visual system altered in this way. For instance, the blue, green, and red neural pathways might be randomly connected as a natural part of the brain's development in the womb. Even so, we would not be able to tell this difference by speaking with each other. We would all still gaze at the sky and remark about its blueness, even though it would be a different experience for each of us. There is no way to tell if one person is having the same experience as another. Our ability to communicate about these things is just too limited.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to show that the first-person viewpoint sees the mind as one or more Elements-of reality. To do this, we will discuss five fundamental aspects of consciousness that are seen by introspection: qualia, mental unity, semantic thought, present tense, and free-will. Of course, we cannot define what any of these are; all we can do is use words to point to them. Your task is to look inside yourself by introspection and try to understand what is being referred to. The existence and nature of these things cannot be shown by words, but only by our individual and personal ability to experience them.

Qualia

We experience a wide variety of sensations in our day-to-day lives. For instance, vision allows us to perceive brightness, color and shape. Likewise, from hearing we experience loudness, pitch, and timber. The senses of touch, taste, and smell provide similar sensations that are equally unique. We

are also aware of how it feels to have emotions, to think, to be in pain, and even to exist. All of these sensations are different; we can recognize one from another, and remember our previous encounters with each of them. Philosophers call these raw sensations **qualia**, after the idea that each has its own characteristics or *qualities* associated with it.

We will use color as an example of qualia, beginning with the simple question: *What is it about red that is different from blue*? From the first-person perspective these two colors are clearly not the same. They are different in a basic characteristic; red has the property of redness, while blue has the property of blueness. Those with normal vision understand this concept very clearly; our words are sufficient to point to something that most people already know by direct experience. This allows us to communicate about the property, but only with the severe limitations previously described. For instance, a color blind person would think that the phrases *redness of red* and *blueness of blue* are gibberish.

To examine this further, suppose we ask several scientists and medical researchers what makes red different from blue. A physicist might say that the two colors are different wavelengths of light. An ophthalmologist will have a slightly different answer, telling us that red and blue arise from the activation of different sensory cells in the retina of the eye. Lastly, a neurologist might describe the difference as being the neural activity in different parts of the cerebral cortex. These descriptions are accepted by science as a complete explanation for what is observed from the third-person viewpoint.

But what about the first-person perception of color? Do these scientific accounts tell us why we consciously experience red and blue in the particular way that we do? Most people would say no; there is something about color that cannot be expressed in terms of wavelength or neural activity. Simply put, red *looks* red and blue *looks* blue. For instance, a color-blind physicist knows how science and medicine understand color, but nothing about how it *feels* to see a red apple or a blue sky.

The reverse is also true; a person with normal vision knows about color from direct experience, but might be totally ignorant of the scientific explanation. In other words, the first-person viewpoint of color is one thing; the third-person viewpoint of color is another thing; and having a knowledge of one provides little or no knowledge of the other. Or so it would seem on the face of it.

In this same manner, the ears detect vibration in the air; the nose and tongue detect chemicals in the air and saliva; and specialized neurons in the skin detect pressure, temperature and irritation. In the end, all of these result in neural activity in various parts of the brain. This is how the world of science sees raw sensations, the machinery of the physical world interacting with the machinery of our nervous system.

But all these things appear drastically different from inside of our minds, the first-person perspective. We see an apple as red and smell it as fruity. We hear it crunch as we take a bite. We taste its sweetness, and savor the pleasure it brings to us. We feel the pain as we scrape our lip on the stem. Many find it inconceivable that these raw sensations, these qualia, arise from the machine-like activity of the brain. Even stranger, it is not even possible for one person to describe these things to another. All we can do is experience them for ourselves, and point at them for vague and incomplete communication.

Why do qualia seem so elusive and hard to describe? The answer is very simple and straightforward. It is because qualia are *irreducible*; they cannot be broken apart by the method of reduction. For instance, if we could separate the redness of red into more basic components our task would be done. "It is simple," we would say, "our perception of red is A plus B plus C, assembled according to the instructions in D." But, of course, this is not possible. The redness of red, the terrible feeling of pain, the fragrance of a rose, and all of the other qualia, are irreducible; they are Elements-of-reality of the first-person viewpoint.

Mental Unity

When we look inside ourselves by introspection, we see a mind that is unified, a single cognitive agent, one and only one consciousness. Our many emotions, thoughts, and sensations are inherently part of the whole; they do not exist independently on their own. The mind perceives itself as a single thing, not a mixture of individual components. From the first-person view we see exactly one mind, no more and no less.

This mental unity is perplexing because it does not fit well with what we know from science. As briefly outlined in the last chapter, different areas of the human brain handle different mental tasks. For instance, speech is recognized in one area, bodily movements are controlled in another, and abstract reasoning takes place in yet another. Further, we must remember that the human brain is composed of about 100 billion *individual* neurons, each capable of producing nothing but *individual* action potentials. How is it possible that the neural activity in these many separate regions, and this vast number of individual components, can give rise to a conscious experience that is unified?

Brain researchers call this *the binding problem*. In spite of being given a separate name, this issue it is no different from other aspects of the mind-body problem. The third-person view sees a multitude of individual action potentials passing through a neural network (i.e., Information), while the first-person view sees an irreducible unified mind (that is, an Element-of reality).

Semantic thought

In order to think, one must be able to form relationships between abstract concepts. This is obvious from both the first-person and the third-person viewpoints. For instance, if you mentally say to yourself: "*I am afraid of pain,*" you can easily recognize the individual concepts (*I* and *pain*), and the relationship between them ("*am afraid of"*). In spite of this, introspection tells us that there is more to our thoughts than formal definitions and logic. From the first-person perspective,

thoughts are **semantic**, that is, they have *meaning*. Each has a unique and personal message; they matter to us in a way that the individual components do not. The thought of "*being afraid of pain*" is more than just words and syntax.

To put this into context, we can compare it with a computer program designed to interact with humans by voice command. A good example is the telephone routing systems used by many companies. When you dial their telephone number, a computer generated voice answers and identifies the company. It may then give you several options, depending on such things as whether the business is open or closed, and which employees are available to take calls. As you proceed through the menus, you might be thanked for your selection, be informed of errors, told to wait, given more options, and so on. In other words, the computer program is selecting words and phrases from its memory, and combining them in various combinations according to predetermined rules. Of course, no one would suggest that these computers understand what they are saying. These are simply automated responses; it is unthinkable that these devices derive any type of introspective "meaning" from their activity.

But now let's take this a step further by making the computer program more sophisticated. We will increase the vocabulary of available words and phrases, improve the algorithms that control the sentence syntax, and enhance the logic that determines what to say in particular situations. If our programmers are clever enough, it may be difficult or impossible to tell that we are speaking with a machine instead of another person. However, even with this ability to fool us, there still isn't any apparent way that the computer could be experiencing an introspective "meaning" of its thoughts or speech. But if this is true, how is it possible that a machine such as the brain can generate "meaning?" In short, we have bumped into yet another example of the mind-body problem. The third-person viewpoint sees definitions, syntax, and logic;

all of which are Information. However, from the first-person view we see irreducible "meaning," an Element-of-reality.

Present tense

One of the most peculiar things about the first-person viewpoint is our perception of time. We are conscious only of the *present*. It can never be yesterday or tomorrow; it is always *now*. We can recall the past and anticipate the future, but only by doing so *at the current moment*. Our minds are trapped at the sharp dividing line between *what was*, and what *will be.* Language reflects this by categorizing events into three temporal divisions, what we call the past, present, and future tenses. For example: He ran; He is running; He will run. But we can experience only one of these divisions of time by introspection; consciousness exists only in the *present tense*.

To understand why this is so strange, we need to look at how science views the nature of time. From the third-person, time is an Element-of-reality, a thing in itself, something that cannot be broken into more fundamental elements. It exists alongside the three dimensions of distance to form the framework of our universe. While it is difficult or impossible to say exactly what it is, we can certainly describe many of its characteristics. For instance, we know that time is a continuous dimension that can be labeled with a numbering system, such as done by clocks and calendars. We also know that the laws of thermodynamics define one end as the *past*, and the other end as the *future*. For instance, it would be easy to place several photographs of a bomb explosion in sequential order. First comes the unexploded bomb, then a small cloud of expanding gas, then a large cloud, and so on. Many unusual aspects of time were discovered by Albert Einstein, such as time slowing down near the speed of light, or in the presence of intense gravitational fields.

But what does science have to say about the *present tense*? The astonishing answer is that science knows nothing of it. The concept of "*now*" is something that cannot be observed from the

third-person perspective. For instance, stop and look at the time on your watch. Why is it this particular time instead of some other? Why is it not yesterday, or one minute from now, or ten million years in the future? Why are you now an adult reading this book, instead of a newborn baby seeing your mother's face for the first time? For that matter, why do we not experience all times at once? Science has no answer to these questions. In the scientific view, time is something that stretches unbroken from the past to the future, from the big bang to the end of the universe. Other than the two ends, there are no locations that are unique or special; every point on this continuum is the same as every other point.

But introspection tells us that the scientific view of time is incomplete; a unique point on the time line *does exist*. The instant of time that we call *now* is vastly different from all others. It defines our reality; it is a fundamental part of what we are. While we cannot describe exactly what it is, it is as real as anything we know; it is a self-evident truth of our existence. The *present tense* is an irreducible thing that can be observed only by introspection. It is an Element-of-reality of the first-person viewpoint.

Free-will

Introspection tells us that we are free to think and act in whatever way we choose. We perceive that our minds are continually presented with decisions to be made, and that we make them one-by-one of our own accord, without being controlled by an outside influence. While we can be coerced by the promise of reward or the threat of punishment, nothing can force us to think or act in a way against what our mind chooses. We are free agents; our thoughts and actions are determined by us and us alone.

This is more than just a petty philosophical issue; it is one of the founding principles that free societies are built upon. It would be meaningless for a government to provide freedom for its citizens, if those citizens could not think and act freely within

their own minds. Even more important, society claims the right to punish its citizens for misdeeds, based on the premise that offending individuals freely choose to perform the prohibited acts. The nature of free-will is probably the single most important and far-reaching issue surrounding the mind-body problem. Our governments and laws are inherently based on the first-person perception of free-will.

At the risk of toppling society, let's look at how the third-person perspective sees the issue of free-will. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, scientists such as Galileo, Newton, and Maxwell developed our understanding of what is now called **classical physics**. This involves many different areas, such as motion, heat, energy, electrical and magnetic phenomena, and similar topics. An interesting aspect of classical physics is that it is **deterministic.** This means it is completely *predictable*; if you have a complete enough understanding about something at one moment in time, you can correctly determine what will happen in the future.

Consider, for example, the start of the famous poem: "*I shot an arrow into the air, it fell to earth I knew not where."* With due regards to Longfellow, this archer is obviously not a physicist. If he were, he would know *exactly* where the arrow landed. From the arrow's initial speed and direction, the laws of classical physics exactly determine the trajectory taken and the point of impact. If a more accurate solution is needed, the scientist could take into account less important factors, such as air resistance and the rotation of the earth. However, these are also governed by the laws of classical physics. In short, classical physics tells us that nothing is free to behave as it wishes. Everything in our universe, be it an arrow or a brain, it constrained to follow a predetermined path, dictated solely by the initial conditions and the laws of nature.

This deterministic view of nature radically changed in the early 20th century with the discovery of **Quantum Mechanics**. This is the study of how very small things behave, such as electrons, protons, and neutrons inside of atoms. Quantum

Mechanics is absolutely bizarre; it is nothing like the world of our day-to-day lives. For instance, things of this small size interact as if they were *waves*, but suddenly collapse into *particles* when we try to measure them. Further, this collapse is *random*; it is not possible to know where the particle will end up being located until the collapse actually occurs. We will discuss Quantum Mechanics in the next chapter, when we look at approaches that have been tried to solve the mind-body problem. For now, the important point is that Quantum Mechanics is not deterministic. While we can predict the paths of arrows to an exceedingly high degree, much of the activity in the subatomic realm is fundamentally unpredictable.

The brain operates by biology and chemistry, which do not involve the interaction of things smaller than atoms. Therefore, conventional wisdom tells us that the randomness of Quantum Mechanics does not affect brain function. On the other hand, there are still many mysteries regarding how neurons operate, particularly in regards to synaptic activity. It wouldn't be an earth-shattering event if it were discovered that Quantum Mechanical principles played some role in the process.

But even allowing for this possibility, nothing in the third-person view of the mind can account for our introspective perception of free-will. Suppose you are faced with a decision, such as to continue reading this book or to put it aside. Classical physics tells us that this decision is predetermined; the outcome is fixed even before you thought about the issue. On the other hand, if Quantum Mechanical principles are involved, the decision will have some truly random component to it, much like flipping a coin. The problem is, neither of these conditions, either alone or in combination, correspond to our first-person experience of free-will. Introspection tells us that the decision is ours to make; it is *not* predetermined, and it is *not* random. And just as with the other aspects of our introspective world, free-will cannot be broken apart or reduced; it is an Element-of-reality as seen from the first-person perspective.

One or More Elements-of-Reality

In this chapter we have discussed five specific aspects of the mind as seen from the first-person perspective: *present tense*, *qualia*, *mental unity*, *semantic thought*, and *free-will*. Our ability to list and discuss these as individual items can be interpreted in two different ways. On one hand, it could mean that the mind is not just one thing, but can be divided into several components. On the other hand, we could claim that these listed items are just different facets of a single unified mind. It is difficult or impossible to say which of these is correct, since introspection is such an inexact technique; different people will give you different answers. However, the important point is that all of these things, whether they are individual components or a unified whole, are irreducible. It is not possible to break apart such things as the *present moment*, the *redness of red*, the *oneness of mental activity*, the *meaning of an idea*, and the *freedom to think and act*. In other words, the first-person views the mind as one or more Elements-of-reality.