
Mental Reality

second edition

Galen Strawson

with a new appendix

A Bradford Book
The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

© 1994, 2010 by The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, and information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

This book was set in Sabon by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong, and was printed and bound in the United States of America.

First printing, 1994.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Strawson, Galen.

Mental reality / Galen Strawson.—2nd ed., with a new appendix.

p. cm.—(Representation and mind series)

“A Bradford book.”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-51310-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Consciousness. 2. Behaviorism (Psychology). 3. Mind and body.

4. Materialism. 5. Philosophy of mind. I. Title.

B808.9.S73 2010

128'.2—dc22

2009011301

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1

Introduction

Philosophy is essentially world-wisdom; its problem is the world.
Schopenhauer (1819, 2:187)

1.1 A Default Position

In this book I assume that there is a physical world and that there remains, after all the complications of science, a fundamental sense in which it is more or less as ordinary people suppose. ‘Physical’, however, is a natural-kind term (it is the ultimate natural-kind term), and we may be very wrong about the nature of the physical.

I also assume that some variety of monism is true and that there is, in spite of all the variety in the world, some fundamental sense in which there is only one kind of stuff. These two assumptions amount to the assumption of materialism.

Some may doubt that the position adopted in this book is materialist, because of the way in which it will be qualified by agnosticism and by doubts about the notion of monism in chapters 3 and 4. Nevertheless it accepts the familiar idea that human mental goings-on consist entirely in, are entirely ‘realized in’ or by, physical goings-on.

I also assume that the theory of evolution gives a true (if so far incomplete) account of how beings like ourselves came to exist in an already existing physical world and that we must adopt a naturalistic approach to the question of the nature of mind. But some of what follows may be thought to be incompatible with naturalism as ordinarily understood.¹

1. As applied to this planet, the theory of evolution is incomplete without a plausible account of how DNA evolved. It also faces the difficult question of

In fact, the term ‘naturalism’ is no more determinate than the terms ‘physical’ and ‘material’. All it really involves is a rejection of anything classified as supernatural relative to a given conception of the natural. But we do not know the limits of the natural. We cannot be sure we know the nature of the natural, any more than we can be sure we know the nature of the physical. Most naturalists think that all naturalists must be materialists. But this is true only if everything natural is physical or material. We can’t know that it is true unless we make it true by definition.

Much is uncertain, and must remain so. Nevertheless, the assumptions above constitute the default position, the background against which the following discussion of mind takes place unless the background is itself the subject of discussion.

The argument is articulated by three questions. In their most general form, they are as follows: What is the relation of mental phenomena to nonmental phenomena? What is the relation of mental phenomena to publicly observable phenomena? What is the relation of mental phenomena to behavioral phenomena? But I will be principally concerned with the more specific questions already mentioned in the preface. What part does reference to nonmental phenomena, publicly observable phenomena, and behavioral phenomena play in a satisfactory account of the (essential) nature of mental phenomena?

1.2 Experience

I want to establish a certain broad use of the word ‘experience’. In talking about mental goings-on, I will rarely use the words ‘conscious’ and ‘consciousness’. Instead I will talk of experience: of experience in general, of experiencers, particular experiences, experiential states, experiential episodes, experiential phenomena—human, Martian, dolphin, canine, and so on. I will use the term ‘experience’ to cover everything that philosophers usually have in mind when they talk of consciousness or conscious experience, taking it that “the stream of consciousness” could

how to give a direct evolutionary explanation of the phenomenon of consciousness or experience. This is as much of a problem for physics as for the theory of evolution. (But see chapter 7, note 10.)

equally well be called ‘the stream of experience’ and that the expression ‘conscious experience’ is, strictly speaking, pleonastic. All experience is conscious experience, as I use the term.

I will also talk of subexperiential or nonexperiential states and processes in the brain, rather than talking in the standard way of subpersonal states and processes. ‘Subexperiential’ is preferable to ‘subpersonal’ because subexperiential states of the kind that interest us can occur in experiencing beings that are not persons. In chapter 6, I raise the question of whether any of the states and processes that philosophers usually have in mind when they consider such subexperiential states and processes are correctly or usefully thought of as mental states or processes.

Experience is necessarily contentful, e.g. sensorily or conceptually contentful. Like many familiar things, it appears extraordinary on reflection, and is very hard to describe in detail. It outruns language in many ways. In chapter 4, I will argue that it is the only thing that makes the mind–body problem a problem. It is part of reality. It is as real as rock. The experience of an experiencing being is everything about what it is like to be that being, experientially speaking, from moment to moment as it lives its life. There is an enormous quantity of experience. Consider the four billion human streams of experience in progress at this moment (assuming that the rest of us are dreamlessly asleep).

It is significant that we may feel a difficulty with the idea of the quantity of experience. This may indicate a bias in our conception of the real. It may be connected with our sense that experiential points of view can’t be summed in any clear way. And this may connect with William James’s observation that “the breaches between . . . thoughts . . . belonging to different . . . minds . . . are the most absolute breaches in . . . nature” (1890, 1:226; compare Nagel 1986, chaps. 3 and 4).² The fact remains that there is an enormous quantity of experience.

1.3 The Character of Experience

When people talk of experience, they often have sensations and perceptions primarily in mind. But thinking a thought or suddenly remembering

2. Throughout, when I cite a work I give the date of first publication, or occasionally the date of composition, while the page reference is to the edition listed in the references.

something or realizing that the interval between the perfect squares increases by 2 is as much of an experience as feeling pain when one has burnt one's finger or seeing a raven flying low over bracken. So I will not speak of thoughts *or* experiences, opposing them in the way that some do. Episodes of conscious thought are experiential episodes. Experience is as much cognitive as sensory. It includes everything a bat or a new born baby can feel, and everything a great mathematician can experience in thinking.

The spectrum of experience ranges from the most purely sensory experiences to the most abstractly cognitive experiences. In between, the sensory and the cognitive are inextricably bound up with each other: virtually all experiences have both sensory and cognitive content in varying and unquantifiable proportions. (Some think that there are no pure cases at the two ends of the spectrum, but it is not clear why there could not be.) There are visual, tactile, auditory, gustatory, and olfactory sensations, as well as kinaesthetic and proprioceptive sensations, including sensations of pain, nausea, orgasm, muscular fatigue, "pins and needles," "butterflies," and itchiness. There are emotional feelings, experienced moods, complicated sensory-conceptual experiences associated with love, nervousness, fear, anger, happiness, depression, and so on. There is such a thing as the experience of desire. There is the experience of consciously entertained thought, of reading and understanding, of unplanned fantasy, and of directed imagining.

Perceptual experiences, e.g. visual perceptions, are usually taken as the paradigm of sensory experiences that are also essentially conceptually informed. You look out of a window, and you see an armored personnel carrier rusting under a tree on the far side of a river. In such a case, you take in a spatially distributed array of color patches, whatever else you do. But the character of your experience is fundamentally determined by your sense of your position relative to other objects, your immediate and automatic judgments of size, three-dimensional shape, and distance, and your equally immediate experience-conditioning deployment of specific concepts, like the concepts of tree and water.

These facts are very familiar and need no special discussion here, although they raise interesting questions of detail. It is widely agreed that one cannot sharply separate out the sensory and conceptual elements in perceptual experience. It is well known that the phenomenology of

ordinary perceptual experience is conceptually driven, in the sense that many of the aspects of perceptual experiences that seem immediately given in sensation are given as they are only because, in having perceptual experience, one is automatically deploying certain concepts and is subject to a great number of concept-involving expectations.³

All this is well known, but it may be worth reflecting on another case. Consider what it is like, experientially, to hear someone speaking non-technically in a language that one understands. One understands what is said, and one undoubtedly has an experience. How do the understanding and the experience relate? Most will agree that the experience is complex, and that it is not merely sensory, not just a matter of the sounds. But they will hesitate if it is suggested that there is *experience (as) of understanding*.

Nevertheless, I will now argue that there is such a thing as experience (as) of understanding, or “understanding-experience” for short, just as there is such a thing as visual experience. Defense of this view should help to illustrate the intended force and extent of my use of the word ‘experience’. It needs separate discussion because it may be thought to be deeply dubious, given the recent history of the subject. Perhaps I should say straight away that I will only be concerned with linguistic understanding, not with experiences like the experience of finally understanding how some machine works or the phenomenology of the *Aha! Erlebnis*.

1.4 Understanding-Experience

Philosophers will ask whether there is really such a thing as understanding-experience, over and above visual experience, auditory experience, and so on. Behind their questioning there may lie a familiar doubt as to whether there is anything going on, experientially, that either is or necessarily accompanies the understanding. This question may be asked: does the difference between Jacques (a monoglot Frenchman) and Jack

3. For a good recent discussion see Dennett 1991b. For simplicity, I am contrasting *sensory* with *conceptual*. If one were to go into more detail, one might do better to contrast *sensory* with *nonsensory* and subdivide *nonsensory* into *conceptual* and *nonconceptual* (see Peacocke 1992).

(a monoglot Englishman), as they listen to the news in French, really consist in the Frenchman's having a different *experience*?

Well, it may be wrong to suppose that there is any set of experiential phenomena that can be picked out as constituting the understanding on the part of Jacques. This is not part of my claim. Nor is there any suggestion that his understanding is any sort of directed activity, for it is no such thing. It is an entirely automatic, involuntary, and seemingly immediate process. The present claim is simply that Jacques's experience when listening to the news is utterly different from Jack's, and that this is so even though there is a sense in which Jacques and Jack have the same aural experience.⁴

It is certainly true that Jacques's experience when listening to the news is very different from Jack's. And the difference between the two can be expressed by saying that Jacques, when exposed to the stream of sound, has what one may perfectly well call 'an experience (as) of understanding' or 'an understanding-experience', while Jack does not. Unlike Jack, Jacques automatically and involuntarily *takes* the sounds *as* signs, and indeed as words and sentences, that he automatically and involuntarily understands as *expressing certain propositions* and as representing reality as constituted in certain ways. As a result, Jacques's *experience* is quite different from Jack's. And the fact that Jacques understands what is said is not only the principal explanation of why this is so, it is also the principal description of the respect in which his experience differs from Jack's.

To talk about understanding-experience is to talk about such simple facts as these. It is not to postulate anything suspect or mysterious in the world, because it is to postulate nothing that is not found in these facts. For a being to have understanding-experience is just for things to be for it, in one central respect, as they can be for us, experientially,

4. In one sense, of course, they do not have the same aural experience, because of Jacques's automatic segmenting of the stream of sound into words. But this is unimportant here. Consider another case in which two English speakers hear a coded message in which nothing but whole English words are used to stand for other English words. One of them is intensely familiar with the code, the other does not know it. Here the basic aural experience of the two people may be very similar indeed, although one has an automatic and involuntary understanding-experience that the other does not have.

when we hear utterances that we understand—or think consciously or realize something in silent words. Note that misunderstanding involves understanding-experience as much as genuine understanding does, for understanding-experience is experience *as of* understanding and need not be veridical. (It could be called ‘meaning-experience’.)

To talk of understanding-experience, then, is not to commit oneself to the implausible view that there is some single qualitative type of experience that anyone who has understanding-experience must have. It is not to commit oneself to the view that particular qualitative experiences invariably go with understanding particular sentences. Nor is it to commit oneself to the view that understanding-experience involves any kind of inner mental theater.⁵ The point is simply this: there is in the normal case something it is like, experientially, to understand a sentence, spoken or read. You have just done so and are continuing to do so. Your doing so is not nothing, experientially. It is part of your current *course of experience*, part of the content of your conscious life, and it is happening now.

This is obvious, but the mood of much recent philosophy of mind may make it seem obscure and worth stressing. I take it that it is compatible *plumber’s bill* with any sense in which Wittgenstein is correct to say that “understanding is not a mental process” and with any sense in which Ryle is correct to say that there need be “nothing going on” when one understands something (Wittgenstein 1953, sec. 154; Ryle 1949; for the insertion of ‘plumber’s bill’ and the point that it makes about understanding-experience by its unexpected occurrence in a philosophy text, see James 1890, 1:262). Certainly understanding is not something one does intentionally. In the normal case, it is something that just happens. There is, to repeat, an automatic and involuntary *taking* of sounds or marks *as* words and sentences that one understands

5. Schopenhauer dealt with this idea in 1819: “While another person is speaking, do we at once translate his speech into pictures of the imagination that instantaneously flash upon us and are arranged, linked, formed, and coloured according to the words that stream forth, and to their grammatical inflexions? What a tumult there would be in our heads while we listened to a speech or read a book! This is not what happens at all. The meaning of the speech is immediately grasped, accurately and clearly apprehended, without as a rule any conceptions of fancy being mixed up with it” (1819, 1:39).

and that represent something's being the case. Understanding-experience is simply such automatic, involuntary, experientially aspected taking of sounds and marks and involves no sort of intentional action. As McDowell remarks, it is just a fact that beings like ourselves can be such that sounds or marks "impinge on them with content" whether they like it or not (1980, 137). And as William James remarks, "No word in an understood sentence comes to consciousness as a mere noise" (1890, 1:281). This is a fact about experience.

So something is happening to you experientially, here and now, as you read this sentence. Obviously, there is the visual or auditory experience. In the reading case, there is perhaps a rapid and silent process of forming acoustic mental images. But this is not all, for—*barath abalori trafalon*—one can have all this without the experience of understanding. There is something else that happens—*the mass of the moon is just over one percent that of the earth*—a certain complex modification of the quality of one's course of experience, and not just of one's dispositional set. In a word, there is understanding-experience, understanding-experience whose very existence is sometimes doubted, perhaps because it has no obvious experiential character that it can call its own. It has no striking experiential feel in the way in which experience in any of the sensory modalities usually does. But this does not show that there is nothing that can be correctly called 'understanding-experience'. Rather, it shows that in certain contexts of discussion, we may still be inclined to appeal to an excessively restricted notion of what experience is.

Here it should be noted that understanding-experience, as currently understood, has absolutely nothing to do with what Dennett calls the "phenomenology of comprehension" (1991b, 56–59). He means the various possible imagistic or otherwise sensory-experience-like accompaniments of understanding, and his account of these is generally accurate. 'The Eiffel Tower is going to be dismantled'. Some who hear or read this sentence will form a visual image of the Eiffel Tower. Others will not. Such imaging is not a necessary accompaniment of understanding-experience, nor is it a part of understanding-experience. It is an interesting question whether human understanding-experience always involves experiencing (heard, seen, touched, or imagined) sounds or marks taken as meaningful, especially since understanding-experience

occurs as much in the case of conscious thought as in the case of reading or hearing others speak.⁶

To return to the main theme: one cannot separate off all the sensory-experiential aspects of hearing people talk and then say that although there is also understanding going on as one hears them talk, that fact ought not to be adverted to in any way in a full account of what is going on experientially. One cannot say that the difference between Jack and Jacques is just that certain specific changes take place in Jacques's dispositional set (e.g., his dispositions to respond in certain ways to certain questions) that do not take place in Jack's. If that were so, there would be little difference between the case imagined and a case in which both listen to the broadcast in a language that neither of them understands, while Jacques's dispositional set is, unknown to him, altered by direct brain tinkering in just the way that it would have been altered had he understood what was being said. Or, to get closer, there would be little difference between the case imagined and a case in which Jacques has been hypnotized in such a way that (a) he explicitly believes he understands nothing, so that he listens to the broadcast with complete incomprehension, and (b) he nonetheless takes in what is said, so that he can later respond accurately to questions about the matters discussed in the broadcast. To say that these two cases are similar is to leave out something real that is present in the first case and absent in the second, to wit, Jacques's experience of understanding what was said.

Acknowledgment of the reality of understanding-experience is profoundly important in the philosophy of mind (it will be particularly

6. See below, p. 12. William James may be starting to bridge the gap between understanding-experience and Dennett's "phenomenology of comprehension" with his talk of "the halo, fringe or scheme in which we feel the words to lie" (1890, 1:260), but the gap is very large. There are many similar ideas in the philosophical literature, although I am not sure how many of them support the point that I wish to make about *understanding*-experience. Searle (1992, 60) remarks that "beliefs . . . are actually experienced as part of our mental life," and I take it that he means conscious thoughts that are occurrent entertainings of the contents of beliefs. Flanagan observes that "not all qualia are sensational. . . . Conscious moods, emotions, beliefs, desires . . . have distinct qualitative character" (1992, 64). There is a striking discussion of some aspects of the experience of thought in Jackendoff 1987 (see, e.g., chap. 15). See also James 1890, 1:245–246; Peirce 1935, sec. 223 (quoted by Flanagan 1992, 64); Ayers 1991, vol. 1, chap. 31; and Murdoch 1992, chaps. 8 and 9.

important to the discussion of intentionality in chapter 7). It needs to be dwelt on, but I cannot think of any other way to bring the point home. It seems simultaneously obvious and elusive. Perhaps it helps to think of watching a film and of how what the actors say is part of one's overall experience, and to compare this with watching an undubbed film in an unknown language.

Once the general point is granted, it may be added that the claim that there is something that can correctly be called 'understanding experience' is compatible with the view that talk of understanding-experience may not be appropriate in all cases in which it is correct to say that someone has understood something.

The abstractness and colorlessness of philosophical discourse may incline one to think that it does not provide a very good example when one is trying to convey a properly strong sense of the reality of understanding-experience. This is not so, in fact. The understanding of philosophical discourse must be as good an example of understanding-experience as the understanding of any other kind. To think that it may not be is to misunderstand the nature of understanding-experience. There is, after all, and as already remarked, something it is like for you to read and understand these words. It is part of the course of your experience. Nevertheless, philosophy may slip down one's intellectual throat a little too insensibly for one to be convinced, when listening to it or reading it, that there is such a thing as understanding-experience. Perhaps it really does seem that there is in this case a kind of direct absorption of content, of a sort that constitutes understanding, without anything that could be called 'understanding-experience'. I have suggested that this is not really so. Such a view presupposes a naive and unduly restricted conception of the nature, reality, and extent of experience. To try to convince you, in the wake of Ryle and Wittgenstein, of the reality of understanding-experience, let me quote part of the poem "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" (Raine 1979).

Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings
and some are treasured for their markings—
they cause the eyes to melt
or the body to shriek without pain.
I have never seen one fly, but
sometimes they perch on the hand.

Mist is when the sky is tired of flight
and rests its soft machine on ground:
then the world is dim and bookish
like engravings under tissue paper.
Rain is when the earth is television.
It has the property of making colours darker. . . .
In homes, a haunted apparatus sleeps,
that snores when you pick it up.
If the ghost cries, they carry it
to their lips and soothe it to sleep
with sounds. And yet, they wake it up
deliberately, by tickling with a finger.

This poem is full of complicated metaphors. It is useful as an example because failure to understand all the images on a first reading presupposes a prior understanding of the standard meaning of the words, so that there are two levels or waves of understanding-experience. In this case, puzzlement, or not understanding, presupposes and is itself a form of understanding-experience.

The main purpose of this section is to illustrate the complexity and range of our experience by considering the relatively little discussed example of understanding-experience. I have repeated and varied the point because it may be thought particularly suspect. And yet the facts to which it adverts are familiar facts of common life.

Some may still be worried by the elusiveness of understanding-experience. They may be prepared to concede that there is something that may reasonably be called 'understanding-experience' but be struck by the fact that one can't really do anything much with the idea, theoretically. And they may feel that being able to do something with the idea theoretically is a necessary part of genuinely understanding it, philosophically. They may even think that being able to do something with it theoretically is a necessary condition of accepting it as real.

There is another pragmatic difficulty with achieving a satisfactory grip on the notion of understanding-experience. Suppose that one hears it put forward and discussed, and concludes that there is indeed something that may reasonably be called 'understanding-experience'. One may still remain uncertain as to whether one really knows what it is. This may now be because one is too close to what one is trying to think about, so that it is like looking at an elephant from three inches away.

I don't think either of these problems is serious. One doesn't have to do anything much theoretically with the notion of understanding-experience. Nor does one have to try to get an impossibly detached perspective on it. What philosophy requires of one is simply that one should acknowledge its reality and bear it in mind when trying to form an adequate general conception of the nature of experience. One needs to have such a conception to stay balanced in the philosophy of mind. One needs to remember that experience is a vast part of mental reality, even if mental reality also has nonexperiential parts or aspects.

In discussing understanding-experience, I have focused on reading and hearing others speak. It should now be added that the basic phenomenon also occurs when one thinks consciously. In this case too, apprehension of conceptual content occurs and is part of the course and content of one's experience, part of what has to be detailed in attempting to record one's experience as fully as possible. (It is no good just recording the subvocalized words, as becomes evident when one considers the record of the course of experience of a monoglot speaker of a language one does not know.) This may be clearer to insomniacs, who spend long hours thinking in the dark, than to instant sleepers. It is obvious to non-philosophers and obscured by much philosophy. It may be an elusive fact, hard to grip, but it is extremely important. In chapters 6 and 7, I will suggest (it is an old thought) that there is a solid and unbudgeable sense in which meaning only really lives—exists—in this experience, however much the experience evades description. One has to take account of this in the philosophy of mind. If this is meaning-psychologism, then we badly need a certain amount of meaning-psychologism.

The mass of the moon is just over one percent that of the earth, but I am pessimistic about being correctly understood by philosophers. Not that the point is not straightforward. It is straightforward, but it is also hard to pin down. My central claim is that the apprehension and understanding of cognitive content, considered just as such and independently of any accompaniments in any of the sensory-modality-based modes of imagination or mental representation, is part of experience, part of the flesh or content of experience, and hence, trivially, part of the qualitative character of experience.

Discussing music in *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein writes as follows:

Should I say that understanding is simply a specific experience that cannot be analysed any further? Well, that would be tolerable as long as it were not supposed to mean: it is a specific *experiential content*. For in point of fact *these* words make us think of distinctions like those between seeing, hearing, and smelling. (1980, 70)

This raises a number of problems of interpretation that I will not consider. It is useful to quote it here, because the present point is precisely that we need to allow that a particular case of understanding-experience can involve a specific cognitive experiential content while overcoming the tendency of the words ‘specific experiential content’ to make us think only of distinctions like those found in sensory experience.

I will conclude these introductory sections as follows. In section 1.5, I will briefly note some examples of things that many think of as mental phenomena although they are not experiential phenomena. In section 1.6, I will defend the legitimacy of the notion of purely experiential content. In section 1.7, I will offer a description of four seconds of mental reality.

1.5 A Note about Dispositional Mental States

At some point it will be necessary to face the question of exactly which phenomena are correctly—or usefully—thought of as mental phenomena. There are, for example, many subexperiential processes in the brain, and although many of these subexperiential processes are not plausibly thought of as mental processes (e.g., the circulation of blood), others are more plausible candidates (e.g., the “computational” processes discerned by certain theories of vision). I will try to say something about this difficult question in chapter 6. Until then I will rely on our commonsense view of the matter and take things like sensations, perceptions, emotions, consciously entertained thoughts, imaginings, rememberings, beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, and so on, as paradigm examples of mental phenomena.⁷

7. In this book I will use the word ‘desire’ in the standard way to refer principally to dispositional mental states, although it is more natural to use it to talk of occurrent mental episodes and to speak of preferences, likes and dislikes, attitudes of favor and disfavor, and so on, when discussing the dispositional aspects of desire.

Clearly, these mental phenomena divide into two main types. There are, on the one hand, *occurrent, experiential* mental phenomena, like sensations and conscious entertainings of thoughts, and on the other hand there are *dispositional, nonexperiential* mental phenomena, like beliefs and pro-attitudes. Consider Louis, a representative human being. He may be in a dreamless sleep at time t , and possess no experiential properties at all, at t , while possessing hundreds of thousands of nonexperiential, dispositional mental properties, such as the property of believing that life is extraordinary, or of being able to interpret chest X rays, or of preferring Busoni to Beethoven, or of being uneasy in the presence of horses.

Later on I will consider the claim that the “mental realm,” properly understood, consists of nothing more than experiences. On this view, experiential phenomena are the only true mental phenomena: where there is nothing going on in the way of occurrent, conscious mental phenomena, nothing mental is going on. Mental *predicates* may be true of Louis as he sleeps dreamlessly on, but there are no mental *phenomena* in the part of reality consisting of Louis. For the moment, however, I will accept the ordinary view that there are both occurrent, experiential mental phenomena and dispositional, nonexperiential mental phenomena. It is a further question whether there are occurrent nonexperiential mental phenomena.⁸

1.6 Purely Experiential Content

Louis is a representative human being. He has many beliefs, including the belief that Emily Dickinson was a genius. At present he has a pain in his ankle and is listening to Schönberg’s *Verklärte Nacht* in the orchestral version.

8. The claim that all truly mental phenomena are experiential phenomena is fully compatible with the view that we cannot really make sense of the idea that Louis is capable of having cognitively complex experiences without supposing that all sorts of nonexperiential, dispositional predicates are also true of him. Searle expresses this familiar view vividly, although not unproblematically, with his talk of the “Network” and the “Background” (1983, chap. 5; see also Stroud 1991; Searle 1991; and Searle’s reformulation in 1992, chap. 8).

According to the default position, human beings are roughly as we think they are. So Louis [1] has a physical body, [2] inhabits a real physical world that is more or less as he thinks it is, and [3] is located in it more or less as he thinks he is. But he also has a number of experiential doubles. There is the experiential double who is in fact not in the default position, as he believes, but is a “brain in a vat.” Vat Louis’s course of experience is, *ex hypothesi*, qualitatively indistinguishable from Louis’s; it is indistinguishable “from the inside,” as it were. But although (1) is true of him in a sense (vat Louis is a brain), (3) is false, and (2) may be false (some would say it is definitely false).

Then there is the experiential double who is a Berkeleyan mind (if such a thing is possible). His course of experience is again qualitatively indistinguishable from Louis’s, but in his case (1), (2), and (3) are all false. To these we may add Louis’s “twin” on Perfect Twin Earth, a planet qualitatively identical to Earth on the other side of the universe. (1), (2), and (3) are true of Louis’s twin, and his course of experience is also qualitatively indistinguishable from Louis’s, from the inside. The theoretical point of these variations is very familiar: there is a crucial sense in which all these people have exactly the *same mental life*, the same course of experience.⁹

Without qualification, this claim is not true. If I look at the George Washington Bridge or think about it or form a belief about it, one has to mention the bridge in giving an account of the content of my experience or thought or belief, and one mentions a quite different bridge in giving an account of the thoughts and experiences of my twin on Perfect Twin Earth. He and I do not experience or think about the same thing. So our mental lives are different. Similarly, even if vat Louis and Berkeleyan Louis have mental lives that are qualitatively speaking

9. Perfect Twin Earth is not classical Twin Earth (Putnam 1975). Note that Perfect Twin Earth actually exists on just two assumptions: that the big bang was symmetrical and that determinism is true. It seems that there can be no interchange between the two halves of the universe in this case. They are separated by a virtual mirror. Any spaceship trying to cross the axis of symmetry will crash into an identical spaceship. If they try to maneuver past each other, they will mimic the behavior of a fly trying to fly through a mirror. (Perhaps the big bang had more than one axis of symmetry, and there are several Perfect Twin Earths.)

exactly like Louis's, they cannot have pains in their ankles if they haven't got ankles. And they cannot have beliefs about Emily Dickinson if she does not exist in the universe they inhabit. Nor can they have beliefs about Emily Dickinson if they have never been in any sort of epistemic contact with her; and we may suppose that they have not been.

All this is certainly so. But it is no less certain that there is a sense in which ordinary Louis, vat Louis, Berkeleyan Louis, and Perfect-Twin-Earth Louis all have exactly the same course of experience. The point can be made by observing that if you knew you were one of the four Louises, you could never know which one you were on the basis of your experience. (There is also "Instant Louis," a theoretically interesting person who has just come into existence as part of Instant Earth, itself the result of a sudden and entirely fortuitous coming together of atoms.) So too there is a clear restricted sense of the expression 'the content of experience' in which they can all be said to have experience with the same content. Certainly it is not our ordinary or everyday notion of content, and its importance and even its intelligibility has been doubted (Pettit and McDowell 1986; Burge 1989). But it is quite clear what it amounts to, and it is, for certain purposes, a valuable theoretical notion. One could call it 'purely experiential content'. My purpose here is just to introduce it and note its legitimacy.

This naturally leads to a further notion of theoretical interest, which may be expounded as follows: [1] If we set out to consider the nature of actual experience in all its aspects, we consider not only those of its causes that need to be mentioned in a full account of its content (e.g., the George Washington Bridge) but also any other causes it may have (light waves and so on), as well as its nonexperiential substantial ground or realization, if any (the brain, according to materialists). [2] In moving to the notion of purely experiential content, as above, we take one step away from the project of giving an all-embracing account of the nature of experience, for we endorse a conception of the content of experience that no longer involves necessary reference to certain of the causes of experience (like the George Washington Bridge). [3] But the notion of purely experiential content requires that we now take a further step away from the all-embracing project and drop all considerations relating to the substantial or "realizing" ground of experience as well. One good reason for doing this is that while we know for sure that experience

exists, we cannot know for sure what kind of nonexperiential substantial ground or realization it has. Thus we seem unable to rule out something like Berkeley's story, for example, obscure though it may be.

It seems, then, that one can detach experience considered just as such from all questions about its substantial ground or realization. Indeed, one can detach it from *everything* that is supposed [a] to be necessary for its existence and [b] to have some nonexperiential aspect or character.¹⁰ One is then left with something aptly named 'purely experiential content'. Purely experiential content is just a matter of "what it is like" for a subject of experience, of (experiential) qualitative character—as much in the case of understanding-experience as in the case of purely sensory experience. Everything else has been stripped away.

It is true that most of us believe that experience is in fact realized in or by the brain, that is, in something which (we take it) essentially has nonexperiential properties. And it is true that most of us believe that our experience could not possibly have the character it does have unless many nonexperiential processes occurred in our brains. Indeed, it is arguable that the existence of many experiential phenomena *necessarily* involves the existence of nonexperiential phenomena (see section 5.12). May be. None of this matters here. The present point is that even if all these things are true, it is *still* legitimate to consider experience—the stream of experience—just as such, so far as we can. It is legitimate and important to consider experience and its content quite independently of any actual or possible nonexperiential causes and/or nonexperiential substantial realization that it may have. It is important to take full account of its reality, so considered. There are many things that can be said about it, so considered. Thus for any given individual, there are real differences, as real as any of the other differences in nature, between

10. Descartes was quite right, insofar as he argued for this. He went wrong only insofar as he believed that he could prove that experience (or "thinking," in the wide Cartesian sense) might possibly have no nonexperiential ground at all, i.e., that there might possibly be experience (thinking) while there was nothing that fulfilled conditions (a) and (b). Descartes's position is not as simple as is sometimes supposed, however, for he takes it that only pure rational thought (and also, perhaps, a kind of intellectual joy) can normally go on in a disembodied mind; sensations, imaginings, rememberings, and emotions all depend for their normal occurrence on physical goings-on in a brain, even if a *malin génie* can induce apparent sensations, etc., in a disembodied mind.

smell experiences and touch experiences, or between experiences of red and experiences of green. There is an equally real difference between the experience of thinking that squares can't be circles and the experience of thinking that sadness is a complex phenomenon. We can express the fact that this is so without making reference to any nonexperiential causes of such experiences or to the nonexperiential realizing grounds (if any) of such experiences and, indeed, without having any certain knowledge of what these causes and grounds are. In *Consciousness Explained* (1991b), Dennett raises a number of difficulties for the naive-realist view that there is always a determinate fact of the matter about what experience one is having at any given moment. But none of his cases and arguments count in any way against the point just made. It is an old point, but it may still need some defense today.

1.7 An Account of Four Seconds of Thought

I turned a page in a psychology textbook and saw a black-and-white photograph of a crowd of people crushed against a wall in a soccer stadium. Too fast for subvocalized words my mind flashed with [1] the thought 'I'm glad it wasn't me'. For a moment this thought was completely self-concerned. At the same time, [2] a grasp of the experience of the trapped people became present, which produced [3] a strong feeling of sympathy. Concurrently, there was [4] an impulse of contrition about the occurrence of (1). This blurred with (3) and was simultaneously genuine and apotropaic.

Almost immediately (3) and (4) were jumped on, and [5] accused of insincerity—of being less than immediately spontaneous and therefore under suspicion of having been dutifully produced in the wake of (1). Again almost immediately—this was a familiar routine—there was [6] the thought that (3) and (4) were not really insincere at all and that (1) occurred in thought in spite of (3), the more natural response.

During this process there had also come to be present [7] the idea that I somehow make myself have (or: some agency in me makes me have) thoughts like (1) as a kind of regulatory dare to myself, and in order to keep alert in me a suspicion of myself that I think I ought to have—a suspicion of those of my thoughts that look like naturally good thoughts. And then, immediately after (1) to (7), there was [8] a rapid

higher-order thought to the effect that the whole previous process of thought involved impulses of automatic, involuntary superstition. There was superstition not only in (4), insofar as it was an apotropaic reflex, but also in (1), because (1) wasn't just the "fat relentless ego's" natural self-expression (Murdoch 1970, 52). It was also (although it took place in an atheist) [9] a God-daring or Nemesis-daring thought-impulse. That was its main source, even if the fat ego and the business recorded in (7) were also active. Moreover (1) was partly driven by the impulse 'Let me see if I can't think such a thought'. (Children may be particularly subject to this sort of impulse.)

(4) was partly superstitious, because it was an apology before conscience, superego, or God, as if some placation were needed to avert possible retribution. And (5) jumped on (4) immediately, but it too was classified, in the complex (8)-thought, as a further attempt at superstitious placation insofar as it was an attempt to achieve genuine sincerity by confessing to an earlier insincerity. The content of the impulse behind (5) was seen to be roughly [10]: 'I have human faults, but as long as I try to be truthful, I cannot ultimately be condemned'. Like everything else recorded here, the thought that (10) underlay (5) was in some sense present to consciousness.

(8) jostled or ran concurrently with a further routine thought, [11] the thought that (5) was a step in a standard regress, in which each stage condemns its predecessor for insincerity and claims to be the terminus of true sincerity. The regress ran on for a couple of stages through (5) and (6), but after that the mind couldn't be bothered, familiar as it was with the fact that it is difficult to keep track in such disputatious regresses, partly because they confuse and become part of the thing being disputed and can never be resoundingly stopped. As the regress started and died, [12] I was aware of the indefatigable logic driving the process by which every attempt to think 'This thought, at least and at last, is truly sincere' is already suspect simply by reason of its explicit reference to the notion of sincerity.

The (12)-awareness, familiar from many past occasions, didn't occur spelled out in thought. Nevertheless, its content was in some way genuinely and fully apprehended by me. It flashed on the mind as a familiar—wearisome—schema. And with it came its usual accompaniment, itself a mere schema too fast for words, whose content, to spell

it out a bit, was [13] that although this automatic activity is indeed wearisome, experience shows that the realization that this is so is no remedy and does not stop its happening. But there was also, as always, a little accompanying shape of hope shadowing the schema, a hope [14] that the ability to be completely aware of the set pattern of what was going on might provide a way out of it. But schema (13) had already encompassed its by-product, the hope-shape, and [15] it had already reckoned it up and ruled it out.

It is worth noticing that (1) was not just apprehended as a content that occurred. It was also thought of as some sort of doing on the part of some impish or morally anxious agency of the mind. Also alive in the mind was the issue of whether (1) was intentionally provocative (see (9)) or whether it was some sort of involuntary reflex—as when someone laughs in a way that seems unkind but is in fact just the product of nervousness. (1) also pulled in a fleeting awareness of the immediate surroundings and a new appreciation of their safety: not the soccer stadium, but bookshelves, armchair, carpet, a puddle of light on floorboards. This awareness was also part of the content of the four seconds of thought. And the whole sequence occurred in a certain moral mood. Such moods set a general context for thought and are themselves part of the overall character, and hence content, of experience. In another context I might have had little moral or emotional reaction to the picture, or I might have reacted to the same picture with distress uncomplicated by self-suspicion.

This, then, was some of the content of about four seconds of thought. Four seconds may seem to be too short a time, but it may have been less than four seconds. The speed may be partly explained by the fact that this general course of thought was well worn. The speed is, in any case, of little importance. It is only part of what may interest us in this illustration of one aspect of the nature of mental reality.

This kind of thing happens to me less now (is this neural or moral degeneration?), but I suspect that experiences like this are quite common, especially among the young. Seeing a man with terrible acne at Paddington Station, I had a strong desire to take over his acne so that he could experience normal-faced anonymity in the crowd. This immediately triggered the process of self-suspicion, the regress of doubting the sincerity of the impulse, doubting the doubt, doubting the doubting of

the doubt, this running on to the fourth or fifth stage. Concurrently there came the thought that it was easy for me to have this desire, since I knew it wasn't really possible, and on the other side, the thought that there was no obvious reason why I shouldn't be just as likely to have spontaneous admirable thoughts as spontaneous egotistical ones, given human nature. Even as it occurred, this triggered the thought that there might be a special and surreptitious form of moral self-indulgence or spiritual pride in automatic self-denigration, and this, in turn, the thought that the last thought might itself be too easy.

Spelling out this content, it seems clear to me that I am doing just that: writing out content that was present to mind, not elaborating on it or adding to it. If this is some sort of delusion, then the existence of the delusion is itself an interesting phenomenon. But conversation often provides examples of the presence to mind of lightning, compacted content. As the other person is talking, there is a small, silent, pointlike explosion, and one knows one's answer is there—although it may take some time to speak it out, although the words and syntax in which one does so are not already fixed in the explosion but are to a considerable extent chosen as one goes along, and although people characteristically expand on their initial thought in the act of vocalization. (James [1890, 1:253] presumably has a more general phenomenon in mind when he estimates that “a good third of our psychic life consists in . . . rapid premonitory perspective views of schemes of thought not yet articulate.”)

This, then, illustrates one of the ways in which experience, and hence mental reality, can be complex. I think it is useful to be reminded of this sort of thing when one does philosophy of mind.¹¹

11. Rereading this passage several years after having written it, I am struck by how it confirms Dennett's (1991b) suggestions about the nature of the processes that underlie thought and speech.