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Rorty's Philosophy of Consciousness

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Abstract

This essay begins by asking why Rorty would endorse a physicalist agenda which, on the face of it, ran counter to his aims in philosophy; and concludes both that his motivation was confused, and that he failed to detach physicalism from metaphysics and scientism. I begin by showing the importance of metaphilosophy to Rorty's position on consciousness, and the centrality of consciousness to his overall project. I then summarise Rorty's position, which was essentially derived from Ryle, but uniquely driven by metaphilosophy. My assessment begins by disputing Rorty's thesis about the historical origins of the concept of consciousness, before following him into his favourite argumentative territory by talking about the social utility of first-person reflection on consciousness, and his own motivations for wanting to undermine such reflection. I conclude that because of his obsession with religion, Rorty became entangled in a scientistic agenda he should have opposed.

Keywords

Consciousness; Physicalism; Metaphilosophy; Eliminativism; Behaviourism; Subjectivity; Explanatory Gap; Metaphysics; Scientism; Ryle

1. The Odd Physicalist Out

These days, Rorty's name is most associated with his postmodern (he would say pragmatist) rejection of objective truth, and attempt to blur the boundaries between philosophy and literature. In the 1960s and '70s it was most associated with his philosophy of mind. That Rorty did not abandon his interest in philosophy of mind, however, is indicated by the fact that the book which enacted the transition between his earlier and later images, namely *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, both begins with, and argumentatively hinges upon, an attempt to deconstruct modern conceptions of mind, and in particular, consciousness. Moreover, consciousness was an issue Rorty regularly returned to thereafter; it figures prominently in the final collection of his papers, for instance, where we find him reflecting on the contemporary debate led by David Chalmers. This was not a lingering, nostalgic interest in the kind of debates he was once prominent within. Rather, his views on truth, metaphilosophy and consciousness were all intimately linked. Consciousness was a philosophical issue Rorty felt he needed to discredit, in order to pave the way to his views on truth and metaphilosophy. Those views became increasingly prominent in defending his position on consciousness, and in the end, there was just a unified package; but consciousness provided Rorty's means of breaking into that hermeneutic circle.

Rorty's philosophy of consciousness is part of a physicalist tradition that stems from Ryle; as is Dennett's, of which Rorty enthusiastically approved. Detractors of this tradition accuse it of "eliminativism", which derives from the label James Cornman coined for Rorty's position, and which Rorty embraced for a time. But it is now a term of abuse in some quarters; an attitude Galen Strawson writes large when he says that consciousness eliminativism is "surely the strangest thing that has ever happened in the whole history of human thought, not just in

the whole history of philosophy”, adding that it is, “the silliest view ever put forward” (Strawson 2008: 6). I know what he means; on the face of it, my current situation – looking at the computer screen and thinking about what to write – provides ample reason to think that consciousness could never be eliminated from a credible world-view. The particles physicists currently talk about seem far more likely candidates for eventual elimination, given how much physics has changed over the centuries; but experiences, like tables and chairs, seem ineliminable simply because they number among the manifest realities which science and other disciplines set out to explain. So why did Rorty endorse this view?

We will not find the usual physicalist motivation, namely that everything is physical, and so either consciousness is too, or else is an illusion. And that raises the question: why would Rorty commit to an agenda which, on the face of it, is set by goals diametrically opposed to his own? For consciousness provides the main obstacle to physicalist ontology; to a metaphysical conception of the world as essentially physical. As Putnam once said, physicalism is the only metaphysical view with “contemporary ‘clout’” (Putnam 1983: 208), and that is why the issue is so hard fought within philosophy; physicalists want to overcome the apparent obstacle of consciousness, so they can keep their work in step with science and help to demystify the world. Given that Rorty’s goal was to eradicate metaphysics, and free us from the kind of scientism that privileges the vocabulary of physics over others, then, it might seem rather puzzling that Rorty was with the physicalists. In line with his pluralism, should he not have welcomed this obstacle to the last bastion of metaphysics, deplored the scientism behind attempts to overcome it, and insisted that talk of conscious experiences is as legitimate as talk of anything else? Should he not have said that efforts to show that discourse about mind can be reconciled with an exclusively physical discourse, are a paradigmatically philosophical waste of effort? That they are misguided attempts to make different discourses

commensurable, in order to satisfy the demands of metaphysical ontology to privilege one, and then reconcile all others to it?¹

Rorty, however, thought the Rylean tradition provided “one of the few clear instances of intellectual progress which analytic philosophy has to its credit” (Rorty 1991a: 3). To understand why he thought this, we must turn to his metaphilosophy. For what makes Rorty a unique philosopher of consciousness is that his position is metaphilosophically driven; explicitly so. He never wasted an opportunity to turn debates about consciousness around to metaphilosophy – to the motivations of philosophers who oppose physicalism, and to his own purportedly better, more historically attuned, motivations. This should come as no surprise, given that Rorty thought “substantial philosophical doctrines” were “inseparable” from “metaphilosophical issues – issues about what, if anything, philosophy is good for and about how it is best pursued” (Rorty 2007: 122). To understand the motivation for his position, then, and indeed what it amounts to, we need to see how it connects with his metaphilosophy.

2. Rorty’s Position

Rorty’s position has two integrated components. The first consists in making the case that the language of natural science is capable of incorporating consciousness. Thus he is happy to endorse Frank Jackson’s statement that “if you duplicate our world in all physical respects and stop right there, you duplicate it in *all* respects” (Rorty 2007: 176). Of course, many philosophers would accept this, and hence call themselves “physicalists”, while still thinking that consciousness presents an obstacle to scientific understanding; that there is an “explanatory gap”, as Joseph Levine (1983) puts it, between our microstructural understanding of the brain and our first-person conceptions of conscious states. Rorty,

however, thinks these are just different ways of talking that can be easily reconciled; he has no patience with “defeatist guff” about the “limits of science” (Rorty 1998: 120). This first-order, more purely philosophical component of his position is entirely in-line with the Rylean tradition, and hence not terribly original. In fact, Rorty regarded distinctions within that tradition as essentially trivial; behaviourists, identity theorists and functionalists, he drolly says, “had very little to disagree about, but managed it nevertheless” (Rorty 1982a: 333).

What sets Rorty apart is that he wanted to detach physicalism from ontology and scientism. So he does not think the ability of physics to describe everything in micro-structural terms shows that it thereby captures the ultimate nature of reality, and consequently should be privileged as the area of culture uniquely capable of telling us what is actually out there in the world. This difference stems from the second, metaphilosophical component of his position, which consists in explaining why we should welcome the idea of an exclusively physical description of ourselves, and why resistance to it is badly motivated. Both explanations have the same root. Thus the reason purely physical descriptions are to be welcomed is that they distance us from the idea that there is an objective truth we can anchor our contingent conversations to, and to which we might turn for ahistorical guidance; the idea that we are alone in the universe without supernatural help went “hand-in-hand with the admission that Democritus and Epicurus had been largely right about how the universe works” (Rorty 2007: 147). While the reason the apparent obstacle of consciousness to universal physical description has been invested with philosophical significance, as Rorty sees it, is exactly because of such hopes for a guiding objective truth.

Persuading us to abandon essentialism, intrinsicity, and hence ahistorical, objective truth, was the overarching aim of Rorty’s philosophical career. So since he saw the mind as the

“last refuge of intrinsicity” (Rorty 1998: 110), it was crucial to his project to show it to be just as much a relational node within our culturally constructed web of belief as anything else; that it was just something we talk about, and could talk about in various ways, including physical. Ways of talking about consciousness which allude to an intrinsic nature resistant to physical description thus needed to be abandoned, and Rorty’s efforts to persuade us to do this are an exercise in “cultural politics”, on a par with efforts to discourage racial, nationalist, or theological terminology (Rorty 2007: 3ff.). However, in addition to promoting the demystifying language of physicalism, Rorty also needed to show that it does not have positive metaphysical implications of its own; otherwise his project would backfire. And this is the balancing act Rorty’s philosophy of consciousness tries to perform. It is essentially an endeavour to harness the anti-metaphysical force of a universal physical vocabulary, while discouraging any rebound into physicalist metaphysics.

With hindsight, at least, Rorty’s direction of travel was clear in his first published works, and his subsequent writings simply developed and refined his position. Thus in 1963, we find him arguing that empiricism and extensionalism are unobjectionable, so long as they are held apart from the reductionist project of constructing a unitary language adequate to the world; the latter being infected by Sellars’s “Myth of the Given” (Rorty 2014: 96ff.). This was a first effort to separate worthy ambitions for a universal scientific language, from metaphysical ambitions. Then in 1965 (ibid.: 106ff.), in his influential paper advocating eliminative materialism, we find him arguing that talk of conscious sensations, just like talk of tables, will probably always be with us, due to its convenience over talking about complex microphysical configurations. However, since this is a matter of convenience rather than principle, such talk *need not* always be with us; which is all physicalism needs to establish. Here we see clearly that all that ever concerned Rorty in this area, was showing that

consciousness lacks an intrinsic nature which stops science in its tracks, and thereby motivates metaphysics. The excitement to be found in later eliminative materialists about the progress science can make when not held back by the obsolete category of “mind”, is entirely lacking in Rorty. He did not think “a perfected neurophysiology would tell us anything interesting about mind or language” (Rorty 2007: 177), and wondered why philosophers like himself should take any interest in the latest scientific developments, when they are “puzzled by ends” but “offered information only about means” (ibid.: 100).

Rorty continued this trajectory in 1967 (Rorty 2014: 132ff.) by arguing that the fundamental opposition between metaphysicians and analytic philosophers, was that the former think metaphysics will make us wise by setting a certain description of the world in stone, while the latter invest their hopes in redescribing and recontextualising; as he planned to do with consciousness. And then between 1970 and 1972, all the main pieces of his position fell into place, as he argued that the notion of prelinguistic awareness of consciousness to which our descriptions must answer is untenable (ibid.: 199ff.), that the Cartesian notion of consciousness is at the root of modern metaphysical ontology (ibid.: 208ff.), and that physicalism should not be construed as finding scientifically acceptable inner causes of behaviour to replace Cartesian mental states (ibid.: 290ff.; 299ff.).

The details of Rorty’s position emerge most clearly in five papers that span his career after PMN.² We already know from PMN, that Rorty thinks the modern concept of mind as something which presents a contrast with the physical world, arose from two influential attempts to solve once pressing, but now obsolete social needs. The first was the need felt by the ancient Greeks to find some distinguishing characteristic of humans that accounts for our dignity, and raises us above the level of mere animals. Plato’s solution was that we have

minds which allow us to think about universal truths, such as those of mathematics, and thereby raise ourselves above mundane, particular states of affairs. The second was the need felt in the early modern period to make human reason, rather than divine revelation, the foundation of knowledge. Descartes's solution was that all knowledge is built up within the conscious mind.³ This innovative conception of mind required Descartes to lump together two categories, thoughts and sensations, that had not previously been united; and according to Rorty, should never have been. But by bringing sensations upwards to join thoughts in the mind, Descartes was able to settle another matter that worried him, namely that the mathematical approach of the new science seemed to portray reality as a "a vast web of relationships" (Rorty 1993: 401), with no room for the manifest and apparently intrinsic qualities we encounter, such as the greenness of a leaf or the taste of an apple. So Descartes housed these "secondary" qualities in the mind to save them from the onset of science.

It is this last move which ultimately generated the problem of consciousness as we understand it now; what Chalmers calls "the hard problem". As Rorty sees it, this was due to an "unfortunate bit of residual Aristotelianism" on Descartes's part, which led him to create consciousness as "a refuge for Aristotelian notions of substance, essence and intrinsicity" (Rorty 1998: 113, 111). It would have been better if he had allowed the new science to sweep away all vestiges of intrinsicity. But a residual religious craving for our discourses to be guided by something solid and unshakable, led to trust in God being transposed into the apparently secular alternative of trust in the independent nature of reality; though in actual fact, reality "as it is in itself, apart from human needs and interests" is "just another of the obsequious Names of God". (Rorty 2007: 134). Thus the enlightenment project of attaining human self-reliance was left incomplete; Rorty wanted to finish the job.

These developments to the concept of mind landed philosophy with a “blur” that has proved to be more trouble than it is worth (Rorty 1982a: 325ff.). The resulting concept was a blur because it combines distinct epistemological and moral concerns. Epistemologically, the mind is supposed to be our first point of contact with the world, and hence essential to our status as knowing subjects; this feature was the focus of British Empiricism. And morally, the mind is supposed to account for our moral worth, such that people (and other animals, we now think) are supposed worthy of moral concern because they are conscious; this feature was the focus of German Idealism. These concerns were artificially hitched together by Plato and Descartes’s innovations, and the result is that we now have “no ‘intuitions’ about mind as such” (ibid.: 325).

Philosophical ontology emerged as both a response to the epistemological problems Cartesianism generated – the task being to describe the world in such a way as to undermine scepticism – and also as a reaction against the creeping materialism which modern science set in motion, and which was thought to devalue us. Thus metaphysics had both epistemological and moral motivations, in line with the blur of a concept it worked with. With the advent of Darwinism in the nineteenth century, however, the question of the human place in nature had been settled in favour of materialism – we were fundamentally like the rest of nature, from which we had blindly evolved. This led to two kinds of bad philosophy; the kind that saw consciousness as our last hope for specialness, and the kind that embraced materialism, but thought we must radically adjust our self-image now we know we are machines. But materialism is essentially anti-metaphysical – it makes everything relational. And it is also morally benign, because,

The secret in the poet's heart remains unknown to the secret police, despite their ability to predict his every thought ... Our inviolable uniqueness lies in our poetic ability to say unique and obscure things, not in our ability to say obvious things to ourselves alone. (Rorty 1979: 123)⁴

In the twentieth century, consciousness became an interesting topic again, when Ryle realised that we do not have to take consciousness seriously. The reasons why we thought we needed to were subsequently dismantled. Thus consciousness was detached from epistemological concerns by Sellars's "Myth of the Given" idea, which showed that nothing we talk about has epistemic privilege. And the idea that we have privileged access to subjective states was undermined by realising that we have come to think this way only because of a special linguistic practice, namely that of according incorrigible status to the noninferential and automatic reports we have trained ourselves to make on some of our internal states; this status was accorded because such reports are reliable, but was metaphysically blown out of all proportion.

This tradition became truly credible when it led to non-reductive physicalism, and hence detached itself from both metaphysics and scientism. It achieved this through the realisation that reduction is a relation between linguistic items, not ontological categories, and hence that the irreducibility of mind is simply a matter of convenience; it remains a useful linguistic tool because of the practice of making incorrigible reports, and the complexity of neurophysiology – and useful tools will always stick around unless they can be replaced by better ones. Philosophers who continue to resist this linguistification of consciousness, by insisting on the intrinsically subjective nature of "what it is like" to have an experience, are motivated by an essentially religious "ambition of transcendence"; their aim of transcending

our current understanding of the world to discover how it really is, is just a “tender-minded yearning for an impossible stability and order” (Rorty 1998: 104-5). Since our physical understanding of the world is purely relational, then, their yearning attracts them to consciousness, for which they have invented a “specifically philosophical game”; the only function of which is to “disjoin pain from pain-behaviour” (Rorty 2007: 12). Playing this game allows them to imagine “zombies” who are physically identical to us but lack consciousness. But zombies that simulate consciousness perfectly *are* conscious; “[s]ufficiently *widely* accepted simulation *is* the real thing” (Rorty 1980: 445).

The only way to deny this is to invoke the ineffable. For you can only defend intrinsic, nonrelational features, if knowledge of them is not the same as knowledge of how to describe them; and for that you need nonlinguistic acquaintance with the ineffable, given that only “the ineffable – what cannot be described at all – cannot be described differently” (Rorty 2007: 118). To resist this kind of pernicious mysticism, you need only invoke a little commonsensical verificationalism, while reminding people that exactly the same line now taken by defenders of subjectivity, was once taken to defend religious belief. Thus traditional theologians argued that to deny God was to fly in the face of common experience, and said that theology begins in the acceptance of supernatural events; just as some contemporary philosophers say that investigating the mind begins in the common-sense acceptance that experience is subjective. Just as the former beliefs died away not because of internal theoretical flaws, but rather the attractions of humanist culture, so the latter will die away because of the attractions of Rylean physicalism.

3. Assessment

The central component of Rorty's history is bunk; namely that thinking about the mind as an internal arena of thoughts and feelings was a social innovation led by philosophers. For without the benefit of twentieth century physicalist philosophy, I cannot even begin to imagine an alternative way of thinking about the mind (and as we shall see, even physicalist philosophy does really not change the situation). To think that our ancestors had a different way of looking at the matter is to portray them as inscrutable aliens; but from the documents they left, they seem essentially just like us.

Here is an example which shows Rorty is wrong; there are many others I could have used, but I think this one is good enough on its own.⁵ In Homer's *Odyssey*, there is a scene where Circe the witch transforms some of Odysseus's companions into pigs. As he puts it,

They had bristles, heads, and voices just like pigs – their bodies looked like swine – but their minds were as before, unchanged. In their pens they wept. (Homer, *Odyssey*, 10. 313-5; trans. Johnston 2006: 195)

The pigs are weeping, surely, because they are having human thoughts such as “oh no, I've been turned into a pig”; along with human feelings of despair. They are weeping because their conscious minds – their inner thoughts and feelings – are now trapped inside pigs. I think it would take some extraordinarily implausible interpretative pyrotechnics to make the case that this was not exactly what Homer had in mind; and exactly what innumerable generations have immediately thought of when hearing this story. And Homer did not get the idea from Plato or Descartes!

If that is how people have always thought about consciousness, the back of Rorty's metaphilosophical case is broken. For once we rule out the idea that this way of talking emerged because of theoretical concerns about morality or knowledge, we are left with the mundane alternative that it emerged simply because thoughts and feelings *exist*, and so just as with other things we encounter in day to day life (like trees), we developed the most appropriate way of talking about them we could muster. I think people did rather well with the notion of inner subjective events, in fact, given that others can neither hear my thoughts nor feel my emotions; given that we dream at night; and given that I can make my experience of the tree blurry by closing my eyes a little, while I cannot affect the tree itself in this way. Of course our conception of mind has developed over the course of the history of philosophy. But it is simply bizarre – and not remotely backed up by the historical documents – to suppose that this was not roughly our starting point, from which we could never stray too far without thereby ceasing to talk about thoughts and feelings. Why should they be any different from trees in this regard?

Now if the supposedly “Cartesian” conception of consciousness is really just a natural way of thinking about pre-existing items that Descartes sharpened up,⁶ then we are committed to the idea, which Rorty and like-minded Ryleans pretend to find preposterous, that we are conscious before we learn to talk about consciousness. But really, what is so odd about that? There are trees before we learn to talk about them. Rorty cites with relish Sellars's parody of this idea: “‘This one,’ this child's mind says to itself in its private little language, ‘stands out clearly. (...) That *must* be what mother calls ‘red’!’” (Rorty 2007: 114). Well, I think we can all agree that this is not what happens; whoever thought otherwise? But what is supposed to be wrong with the idea that after we have learnt to talk about external objects (which we

know comes first), we then acquire the sophistication to talk about the inner states that alerted us to those objects in the first place, and which were there before we could talk?

Wittgenstein's private language argument, perhaps (ibid.: 12)? If successful, it would show that our words can only latch onto things in the public domain. But expert wine tasters do a good job of putting their private sensations into the public domain, and generating intersubjective criteria for discussing them; and at a more theoretical level, all those endless discussions about qualia in the philosophy journals have done the same thing. Two people can stand in front of the same tree and reach intersubjective agreement on how best to describe it, and I see no reason why two people having the same kind of private sensations should not reach this sort of agreement also. The fact that they cannot see each other's sensations makes no fundamental difference, because each can feel something; and if their descriptions of what they can feel are a suitable match (they both try Popping Candy for the first time – "did you feel that?"), then they can discourse at leisure about how best to describe the experience they are sharing.⁷ People do this kind of thing all the time, and thereby learn about each other's feelings, while also learning better ways to describe their own. Rorty confuses ineffability-to-contemporary-science, with ineffability.

It seems to me that Ryleans have quite a nerve reaching for the intuitive high-ground against pre-linguistic consciousness, because their alternative – given the best possible gloss – is that consciousness magically arises when we learn to talk, and that prelinguistic babies and dogs in pain are simply squeaking like door-hinges.⁸ That is about as implausible – as distant from how people ordinarily think about the world – as a philosophical thesis can possibly get. But such a gloss would be misleading, as the most self-aware and consistent Rylean (i.e. Rorty) realised, since what the view really amounts to is that there is no consciousness (as

commonly understood), only talk about consciousness. And once you see that, you also see that it was merely tautologous for Rorty to claim that (*talk about*) consciousness only arises when we first *talk about* consciousness. Pre-linguistic consciousness becomes a contradiction in terms on this conception of “consciousness”, according to which talk about sensations is not talk about *something*, but rather simply *talk*, with the things we take ourselves to be talking about revealed as simply shadows of language. With this idea, we reach the very limits of philosophical implausibility. Berkeley got to the same place, albeit from the opposite direction, by claiming that there are only experiences of trees, and not really trees; that the trees were the shadows of language.

The whole Rylean tradition, right through Place and Armstrong to Dennett, has been premised on the idea that when we think about conscious experiences, we are actually thinking about behaviour. The tradition started out with Ryle’s idea that this is *all* we are thinking about; but Place could not stomach the notion that our first-person reflections fail to latch onto anything solid, and so adjusted the tradition with his idea that our conception of an experience is of a generic “something” that is caused by, and in turn, causes, certain kinds of behaviour. The tradition has since wavered between going on to say, like Place, that the “something” is an inner cause (a brain state), or else that it is an illusory shadow of language; the latter being Rorty’s preferred option. And the reason it has wavered, is that our conception of a conscious sensation is obviously not just that of a behavioural nexus (with or without a categorical basis), because we also form positive conceptions of experiences as subjective, private events which feel a certain way; otherwise there never would have been a philosophical problem of consciousness. The whole tradition agrees that this specifically phenomenal way of thinking about consciousness is illusory, so given that this is all that was ever at issue, the distinctions within that tradition are, as Rorty said they were, essentially

trivial; Rorty simply preferred to make do without an inner “something”, because he did not want philosophers and scientists to be looking for physically respectable replacements for conscious states, and hence have them perpetually in hock to the Cartesian tradition.⁹

For the Rylean tradition, then, when it seems that we are confronted by a private sensation, we are actually just making a false judgement. Dennett is refreshingly clear about this, when he says that although it may seem to him that he is having a vivid experience, no “such ‘plenum’ ever came into his mind”; he simply formed the false judgement that it did, in the sense that he was disposed to utter a false statement (Dennett 1991: 408). However the insurmountable obstacle to taking this line, it seems to me, is that the purportedly false judgements will never go away; so given that we are always going to judge that we have experiences, the philosophical view that this judgement is mistaken will never be believable.

Prescient as ever, Rorty tried to undermine this line of thought with his Antipodeans thought-experiment (Rorty 1979: chapter 2; see also Rorty 2014: 204). These imaginary people refer directly to their brain states, and having never been infected by the Cartesian tradition, they consequently have no dispositions to make false judgements to the effect that they undergo subjective experiences; they first heard about this latter idea from us humans, and find it thoroughly baffling. Rorty thinks that we could in principle become just like them. However, this example backfired because Kenneth Gallagher (1985), in one of the most conclusive rebuttals of a philosophical argument I have seen, showed that the Antipodeans would actually have to be just like us. Gallagher’s essential point is that even if Antipodean children learn to say “my c-fibres are firing” rather than “that hurts”, when they graze their knees, they would still notice a massive difference between this way of thinking about c-fibres, and what they would later learn when they came to study neuroscience. Seeing the apparent

irreconcilability between their objective and subjective conceptions of c-fibres, then, they would be landed with the same problem of consciousness as us; whenever they hurt themselves, they would judge that their c-fibres were presenting themselves in a special, private way; and Rylean philosophers would have to insist, against all odds, that those judgements are false.¹⁰

Note that the situation for Ryleans is quite unlike Rorty's favourite example of a once implausible thesis which became accepted as common sense, namely the Copernican revolution. For once you know the Sun does not really pass over the Earth, and that it simply looks like that because we are rotating, you retain no inclination to judge that the Sun is going around the Earth. You know it is not, but you also know what it looks like, and hence why people once thought otherwise; you understand the inclination to make a false judgement, but you do not have it. In the Rylean case, however, you are not being told to interpret your experience differently, but rather *that you do not have any experience*; the false judgement is not one made on the basis of experience, but rather one based on no experience. The inclination to make these false judgements will never go away, then, so long as we seem to feel and think things; which of course we always will. Given that the false judging cannot actually *be* the experiencing, otherwise it would not be false (I suspect that confusion in this area lends the position a false sense of stability in the minds of some of its advocates), we end up with a position which is unfalsifiable from a third-person perspective, and unbelievable from a first-person perspective. But if the position were correct, and hence there were no first-person perspective, then it *ought* to be believable; we ought to be able to lose our inclination to make false judgements. Even the Antipodeans cannot do that, however.

Rorty likes to talk about usefulness, so let us follow suit. He thinks the concept of consciousness his opponents apply is useless; that it serves no purpose except to set up unverifiable differences between us and zombies, and thus provoke pointless debates. But is it really pointless to distinguish us from physical replicas that lack consciousness, assuming such things are possible?¹¹ It seems to me that the distinction serves a crucial explanatory function. Human sex- and drug-addicts have an obvious motivation which explains their behaviour: they are trying to get “that feeling”, again and again. They cannot get enough of it. But what would their zombie equivalents be up to? A zombie teenage boy locked away in his bedroom with a pornographic image would be engaged in completely inexplicable behaviour. But add the consciousness, and we all know why his human counterpart is doing that: for the internal fireworks that Ryleans are seriously telling us do not exist! Or to raise the tone somewhat, why would zombie gourmets rave about expensive food, when cheaper and more nutritious alternatives are readily available, as they are in our physically identical world? Or ride rollercoasters, listen to music, or visit art galleries? In short, large numbers of activities undertaken in the zombie world would not make much sense; despite their making perfect sense in our world, where consciousness experiences can be invoked to explain them.¹²

Let us take this into the political arena, which is something else Rorty would approve of. He thinks there is no moral or political significance to the question of whether we are conscious in a way that a machine designed to be behaviourally indistinguishable would not be (or at least, could not be known to be, in the absence of a mechanistic understanding of subjective experience). He says,

I cannot see how the question would come up unless one thought that the question of whether foetuses, or illiterate slaves, have rights is to be answered by figuring out

whether they contain ineffable whathis called “subjectivity” or “personhood”. Those who do think so hope that metaphysics will guide us when we make moral and political decisions. This hope strikes me as pathetic. (Rorty 2000: 108)

Rorty’s readers might be mistaken for thinking this hope is anything but pathetic, given that he spent so much of his time arguing that the notion of conscious subjectivity, which has evidently played a leading role in arguments about abortion, vegetarianism, and the like, was a product of metaphysics. However, his wider point is that the concept of consciousness will not help us in the moral and political sphere; that its invocation is an unnecessary and counterproductive red herring. That cannot be right.

In Joshua Oppenheimer’s extraordinary 2012 documentary film, *The Act of Killing*, the mass murderer and torturer Anwar Congo is cleverly led by Oppenheimer to re-enact his brutal acts for the camera; he displays a certain pride and wry amusement in this. In the climax of the film, however, Oppenheimer gets Congo to reverse roles with one of his associates, so that Congo is now playing the blindfolded one facing imminent death. He is exposed to the same situation, and consequent feelings, that he had perpetrated on his many victims; although it is not as bad, as Oppenheimer points out to him, since he is not actually facing death. Congo breaks down under the enormity of it all. Almost unbelievably (practically nothing is unbelievable by this point in the film), it seems he had not thought of it like this before; he had not thought about *what it was like* for his victims. Placed in their position, however, he is directly confronted by the kind of first-person perspective they would have had on the situations he placed them within. And that is what he cannot bear. If he had continued to take a third-person stance, viewing his victims as machines squeaking like door hinges, then he might never have been morally affected. But by employing the “Cartesian” conception of

consciousness – which Rorty would have us believe somehow found its way from Western philosophy into Indonesian culture, so as to infiltrate this thoroughly unsophisticated man – Congo grasps the terribleness of what he has done.

Rorty is very keen on hermeneutic engagement with unfamiliar perspectives (Rorty 1979), and the moral potential of novels to expand our empathy by telling sad stories which “sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language” (Rorty 1989: 94); he even approvingly quotes Kundera saying that novels are what safeguard our “right to an inviolable private life” (ibid.: viii). What Rorty does not seem to have realised is that his philosophy of consciousness ran exactly counter to this agenda. For there is no more powerful and vivid way to empathise with another person, than by imagining yourself into their conscious perspective; by thinking about what it is like for them. If Congo had done that, he would not have found life as a torturer so carefree. And yet Rorty’s philosophy of consciousness tells us that this way of thinking is an illusion; he discourages it.

I think we are currently at a cultural crossroads in our thinking about consciousness. Rorty captured something of the zeitgeist, in that many educated people are now increasingly inclined to think about consciousness in an exclusively third-person way, most typically as a type of computer programme. However I do not think this is due to the influence of Rylean philosophy, but rather the fact that science dominates our culture to a greater extent than ever before; the simple thought is that science says what everything is, so it must say what consciousness is.¹³ And since science is well on the way to making machines that look like they are conscious, people will accept that they *are* conscious; and also have no qualms about enhancing their own consciousness with transhumanist technologies. We face a world in which people envisage uploading their minds onto the internet so they can live forever.

An extreme manifestation of this trend is provided by the enduring popularity – which never ceases to amaze me – of Derek Parfit’s conception of personal identity (Parfit 1984). If you put aside our first-person conception of consciousness, then Parfit’s idea that we might *travel* by stepping into a teletransportation machine – which obliterates us and then creates a physical replica in another place – is unproblematic. So if (and this is effectively the same situation) a replica of me were to suddenly appear by my side, and I am obliged to kill one of us, I am invited to consider it a matter of indifference whether I turn the gun on myself or my replica; since he has an indistinguishable third-person consciousness. And people happily go along with this (I have witnessed it on numerous occasions), despite the fact if the appearance of the replica were accompanied by an unbearable pain (in their “original” body), they would immediately transfer the pain to the replica if given the option – and pain cessation is obviously a less grave matter than death in this situation. The pain would force them to engage in first-person reflection (as would the *real* prospect of death); and yet in their studies, so to speak, people go along with Parfit. How has such a crazy view come to seem plausible? Because an extreme faith in science blinds people to what they already know. And “faith” must be the right word, since if they thought there were even an outside possibility that they would be committing suicide, they would not even *say* that they would consider turning the gun on themselves.

If this conception of consciousness as something you look at from the outside continues to gain acceptance, we will end up in a stupid and even more selfish world. For we will no longer think about the first-person experiences *of others*; but will continue to think of *our own* consciousness this way – because this conception is forced upon us in our own case, but not that of the other. In our own case, we have no alternative; and the Rylean tradition has not

provided one, since the false judgements it insists upon will inevitably take place in the “apparent” presence of consciousness. The intellectual accoutrement of telling yourself that you are making a false judgement will not get in the way of worrying about your own perspective (false judgement or not), but it might confirm your inclination to disregard that of other people. Though I share Rorty’s lack of faith in the ability of metaphysics to settle political and moral matters, it can have influence; and stifling the Rylean tradition, while promoting the legitimacy of our first-person conception of consciousness, strikes me as a step in the right direction. This is already well underway; the emergence of Chalmers onto the scene marked a turning point, I think. He is no frock-coated fogey, which is the image anti-physicalists once had, and placed in the context of the discussions he has sparked off in both science and philosophy, Rylean materialism is now starting to look dated; which is a good sign when it comes to hopes of cultural influence.

Finally, let us talk about motivation: Rorty’s favourite arena of discourse on this topic.

Rorty’s motivation is clear. He thinks that, as John Caputo nicely puts it, Kant’s so-called Copernican Revolution “substantially undid the *real* Copernican Revolution” (Caputo 2013: 135), by placing the Cartesian notion of mind at the centre of reality; when Copernicus had shown the way to a purely scientific conception of reality in which we are not at the centre of things in any sense. In doing so, Kant preserved the notion of an intrinsic nature of reality about which we might discover the objective truth, and this lingering, quasi-religious loyalty to truth gets in the way of what Rorty wants; namely a world in which everything we say, we take responsibility for. This would be a better world, because without loyalty to truth, only to each other, scientists would no longer feel obliged to find out what happens when you split the atom, or test IQ across racial groups; we could decide, as a matter of cultural politics, not to pursue these descriptions.

I think some of the outcomes Rorty envisages are good, but he is looking at things in entirely the wrong way. Truth itself is not the issue; there are innumerable objective truths which the world forces us to accept whether we like it or not. The issue is the motivations which drive people to invest effort in discovering some of these truths rather than others; and that is something we need to get some rational control over if we are to survive and prosper. Getting rid of the concept of consciousness will not rid us of truth; it will simply make us blind to certain truths, and encourage a developing situation in which all truth is thought to reside in science. Which brings us to the gaping lacuna in Rorty's non-ontological physicalism: for if the world is not essentially physical, why should it be that (to quote Jackson again), "if you duplicate our world in all physical respects and stop right there, you duplicate it in *all* respects"? Why should it be that physics can predict "every event in every space-time region" (Rorty 1979: 28)? Ontological physicalists can give the obvious answer; but since Rorty thinks reality has no intrinsic nature, and can be described in any way that suits us, the ability of a *physical*, as opposed to any other, form of description to be all-encompassing, becomes an inexplicable mystery on his account – athletic or economic descriptions would not work, after all. And he ended up in this situation, I think, because he went along with the agenda of metaphysical scientism that dominated Anglo-American philosophy in the twentieth century; simply because of his hunch that anything presented as an obstacle to physical description must have something to do with religion.

Rorty's continual invocation of religion as a hammer to batter his opponents with reminds me of the classic episode of *Fawlty Towers*, in which on hearing that some German tourists are coming to stay at his hotel, Basil runs around reminding everyone not to "mention the war"; despite the fact that nobody apart from him has the slightest inclination to do so. For I

struggle to detect any religious motivation whatsoever in philosophers like Searle, simply on account of their insistence on taking a first-person perspective on consciousness; but that would not matter to Rorty, who used the historical influence of religion as an unfalsifiable explainer of practically any source of opposition to his views. For Rorty was *obsessed* with religion – just like Nietzsche – and projected this obsession onto everyone else. Because of his obsession, he bought into a tradition stemming from Comte, according to which all vestiges of religion must be eradicated from our world-view and replaced with pure science. But unlike the other Ryleans who followed on a crusade against consciousness, Rorty did not believe in science either; he was so obsessed with religion that even scientific truth was too religious for him. Thinking in vain that he could detach Ryleanism from metaphysics, then, he signed up to what is essentially a programme of radically revisionary, scientific metaphysics.

However, I do think Rorty was right to detect a connection between consciousness and religion, since reflection on consciousness can lead into religious hypotheses of transcendent existence; this kind of thing is to be found throughout the history of philosophy. But the crucial point is that it *does not have to* (see Tartaglia 2016); Rorty's obsession with religion led him to reject consciousness because he could not stomach even the mere possibility. This led him to neglect his own insight that the "fact that the vast majority of our beliefs must be true will ... guarantee the existence of the vast majority of the things we now think we are talking about" (Rorty 1982b: 14). My final assessment, then, is that Rorty's philosophy of consciousness is indeed – as Strawson says of consciousness eliminativism generally – silly; though it is considerably more self-aware than the other versions. But the self-aware and original bit, Rorty's metaphilosophy of consciousness, is simply wrong.¹⁴

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Further Reading

Rorty, R. (1982) 'Contemporary Philosophy of Mind', *Synthese*, 53: 323-48. In endnote 2, I list the five papers which (in addition to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*) are the main sources for Rorty's views on consciousness; but if I had to choose only one, this would be it.

Tartaglia, J. (2016) *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*, London: Bloomsbury. For a completely different line on consciousness and its metaphilosophical significance to the one which Rorty takes, have a look at my new book.

Chalmers, D. (1996) *The Conscious Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. This is *the* contemporary classic in the philosophy of mind, which set the agenda for all those discussions about zombies and the 'hard problem'. The start of the book, where Chalmers sets up the issues impeccably, is rather more interesting than the later stuff, where (to my mind, at least) he goes off the rails. Compare and contrast Rorty and Chalmers on the question of whether photoelectric cells (Rorty) and thermostats (Chalmers) are conscious!

Dennett, D. (1991) *Consciousness Explained*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company. The main source for a contemporary Rylean theory of consciousness; unlike Rorty's, it is inspired by science rather than historical metaphilosophy. Rorty's glowing review ('Blunder around for a while'; listed in the 'References' section of this essay) is revealing about his own stance.

Ryle, G. (1949 / 2000) *The Concept of Mind*, London: Penguin. This is where Rorty's physicalist philosophy of mind ultimately comes from.

Nagel, T. (1974) 'What is it like to be a bat?', *Philosophical Review*, 82: 435-450. This classic, which ironically enough took the bat example from a Rylean behaviourist (B.A. Farrell), threw a spanner into the Rylean physicalist works which I doubt will ever be extracted.

Searle, J. (1992) *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Searle's despair at the Rylean physicalist tradition knows no bounds; the first two chapters will be of most interest to students of Rorty.

Rorty, R. and Searle, J. (1999) 'Rorty v. Searle, at last: a debate', *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, 2: 20-67. Unfortunately they discuss truth rather than consciousness; but it is nevertheless fascinating to witness this clash of the titans, and what they say can be readily applied to the topic at hand.

Tartaglia, J. (2007) *Rorty and the Mirror of Nature*, London: Routledge. In this guidebook to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, I explain at length Rorty's 'fast dissolution' of the mind-problem, his attempt to deconstruct its history, and his 'Antipodeans' thought-experiment.

Malachowski, A. (ed.) (2002) *Richard Rorty: Sage Masters in Modern Social Thought*, London: Sage. This expensive four-volume set is great to use if your library stocks it; it contains many key works on Rorty's philosophy of mind, including the important Kenneth Gallagher article I cite in my essay. If your library instead stocks my derivative version, called *Richard Rorty: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (Routledge 2009), then that will work too.

Biographical Note

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Endnotes

¹ If he had said this, his position would have been strikingly close to Collingwood's.

² 'Contemporary Philosophy of Mind' (Rorty 1982a); 'Non-Reductive Physicalism' (Rorty 1991b); 'Consciousness, Intentionality, and Pragmatism' (Rorty 1993); 'Daniel Dennett on Intrinsicity' (Rorty 1998); 'Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God' (Rorty 2007).

³ Although Descartes is invariably the philosopher Rorty mentions in this regard, he apparently considered him to have been mainly just a compiler of extant ideas, rather than an original thinker; see Geuss 2008.

⁴ Note the elitism in this statement; consciousness makes everyone unique, not just 'poets'.

⁵ I could have talked about the Egyptians, for instance; see MacDonald 2003.

⁶ Descartes was in a position to sharpen it up, it seems to me, because he was of a generation which supposed that science was able to mathematically describe the entire physical world; in earlier times, the idea that feelings might reside in the physical world would not have seemed so problematic.

⁷ Imaginative sceptical hypotheses must be put aside; but these would cause just as much trouble for attempts to agree on the nature of the tree. I say that switching from trees to sensations makes no 'fundamental' difference, because privacy is an obstacle to *scientific* description; which is the worry at the root of this position. Also note that I make no claim to knowing what Wittgenstein had in mind (generations of scholars have failed to agree on that), only what Rorty did; and the problem with *that* argument is that if our private sensations can play no role in what we say about them, then why should it be that we spontaneously and autonomously say the same kind of things? Try Popping Candy, if you have not already, and I bet you will describe the consequent sensations roughly as I did.

⁸ Pain is a conversational complement we reserve for *attractive* animals only, as Rorty (at his most unguarded) once argued (Rorty 1979: 173).

⁹ A variant on this tradition emerged in the 1990s, which tried to reconcile it with phenomenal concepts by claiming that they are based on the intrinsic nature of our brain states (Loar 1997). As you might expect, the result was incoherent; see Tartaglia 2013. For an account of why physicalism always ends up in the same place, see Tartaglia 2016: chapter 4.

¹⁰ I am rather more careful (perhaps unnecessarily) about what Gallagher's argument shows in Tartaglia 2007: 83-5.

¹¹ As Chalmers assumes; if you reject this assumption (perhaps on the grounds that we currently lack an adequate physical account of consciousness, and that this might show that certain physical conditions necessitate consciousness), then simply think of zombies as behaviourally identical to us in what follows.

¹² Rorty would presumably respond that the zombies' behaviour is explained by the fact that they are physically identical to us, and hence make the same false judgements. But then if the judgements really are false, the question becomes: why do *we* act in these ways?

¹³ If Rylean philosophy were more widely known and understood, I suspect that its implausibility would tend to produce the opposite effect.

¹⁴ For my own views on all of these matters, see Tartaglia 2016.