

Research Essay

The Idealist View of Consciousness After Death

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Abstract

To make educated guesses about what happens to consciousness upon bodily death, one has to have some understanding of the relationship between body and consciousness during life. This relationship, of course, reflects an ontology. In this brief essay, the tenability of both the physicalist and dualist ontologies will be assessed in view of recent experimental results in physics. The alternative ontology of idealism will then be discussed, which not only can be reconciled with the available empirical evidence, but also overcomes the lack of parsimony and limited explanatory power of physicalism and dualism. Idealism elegantly explains the basic facts of reality, such as (a) the fact that brain activity correlates with experience, (b) the fact that we all seem to share the same world, and (c) the fact that we can't change the laws of nature at will. If idealism is correct, the implication is that, instead of disappearing, conscious inner life *expands* upon bodily death, a prediction that finds circumstantial but significant confirmation in reports of near-death experiences and psychedelic trances, both of which can be construed as glimpses into the early stages of the death process.

Keywords: ontology, metaphysics, mind-body problem, death, near-death experience, psychedelics, quantum physics

1 Introduction

Our capacity to be conscious subjects of experience is the root of our sense of being. After all, if we weren't conscious, what could we know of ourselves? How could we even assert our own existence? Being conscious is what it means to *be* us. In an important sense—even the *only* important sense—we are first and foremost consciousness itself, the rest of our self-image arising afterwards, as thoughts and images constructed *in* consciousness.

For this reason, the question of what happens to our consciousness after bodily death has been central to humanity throughout its history. Do we cease to exist or continue on in some form or another? Many people today seek existential solace in body-self dualism, which opens up the possibility of the survival of

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consciousness after bodily death (Heflick et al, 2015). But is dualism—with the many serious problems it entails, both philosophical and empirical (Robinson, 2016)—the only ontology that allows for this survival?

Although consciousness itself is the only directly accessible datum of reality, both dualism and the mainstream ontology of physicalism (Stoljar, 2016) posit the existence of something ontologically distinct from consciousness: a physical world outside and independent of experience. In this context, insofar as consciousness is believed to be constituted, generated, hosted or at least modulated by particular arrangements of matter and energy in the physical world, the dissolution of such arrangements—as entailed by bodily death—bears relevance to our survival. This is the root of humanity’s preoccupation with death.

However, the existence of a physical world outside and independent of consciousness is a theoretical inference arising from *interpretation* of sense perceptions, not an empirical fact. After all, our only access to the physical is through the screen of perception, which is itself a phenomenon of and in consciousness. Renowned Stanford physicist Andrei Linde (1998) summarized this as follows:

Let us remember that our knowledge of the world begins not with matter but with perceptions. ... Later we find out that our perceptions obey some laws, which can be most conveniently formulated if we assume that there is some underlying reality beyond our perceptions. This model of material world obeying laws of physics is so successful that soon we forget about our starting point and say that matter is the only reality, and perceptions are only helpful for its description. This assumption is almost as natural (and maybe as false) as our previous assumption that space is only a mathematical tool for the description of matter. (p. 12)

The physical world many believe to exist beyond consciousness is an abstract explanatory model. Its motivation is to make sense of three basic observations about reality:

- (a) If a physical brain outside experience doesn’t somehow generate or at least modulate consciousness, how can there be such tight correlations between observed brain activity and reported inner experience (cf. Koch, 2004)?
- (b) If the world isn’t fundamentally independent and outside of experience, it can only be analogous to a dream in consciousness. But in such a case, how can we all be having the same dream?
- (c) Finally, if the world is in consciousness, how can it unfold according to patterns and regularities independent of our volition? After all, human beings cannot change the laws of nature.

Nonetheless, if these questions can be satisfactorily answered *without* the postulate of a physical world outside consciousness, the need for the latter can be legitimately called into question on grounds of parsimony. Moreover, while

physicalism requires the existence of ontological primitives—which Strawson (2006, p. 9) called “ultimates”—beyond consciousness, it fails to explain consciousness itself in terms of these primitives (cf. Chalmers, 2003). So if the three basic observations about reality listed above can be made sense of in terms of consciousness alone, then physicalism can be legitimately called into question on grounds of explanatory power as well. And as it turns out, there is indeed an alternative ontology that explains all three basic observations without requiring anything beyond consciousness itself. This ontology will be summarized in Section 3 of this brief essay.

In addition, the inferred existence of a physical world outside and independent of consciousness has statistical corollaries that can be tested with suitable experimental designs (Leggett, 2003; Bell, 1964). As it turns out, empirical tests of these corollaries have been carried out since the early eighties, when Alan Aspect performed his seminal experiments (1981). And the results do *not* corroborate the existence of a universe outside consciousness. These seldom-talked-about but solid empirical facts will be summarized in the next section.

Without a physical world outside consciousness, we are left with consciousness alone as ground of reality. In this case, we must completely revise our intuitions and assumptions regarding death. After all, if consciousness is that within which birth and death unfold as phenomenal processes, then neither birth nor death can bear any relevance to the existential status of consciousness itself. What does death then mean? What can we, at a personal level, expect to experience upon bodily death? These questions will be examined in Section 4 of this essay.

2 The empirical case against a world outside consciousness

A key intuitive implication of a world outside consciousness is that the properties of this world must not depend on observation; i.e., an object must have whatever properties it has—weight, size, shape, color, etc.—regardless of whether or how it appears on the screen of perception. This should clearly set the physical world apart from the sphere of consciousness. After all, the properties of a purely imagined object do not exist independently, but *only insofar as they are imagined*.

As mentioned earlier, the postulated independence of the world from observation has certain statistical corollaries (Leggett, 2003) that can be directly tested. On this basis, Gröblacher et al. (2007) have shown that the properties of the world, surprisingly enough, *do* depend on observation. To reconcile their results with physicalism or dualism would require a counterintuitive redefinition of what we call *objectivity*. And since contemporary culture has come to associate objectivity with reality itself, the science press felt compelled to report on this study by pronouncing, “Quantum physics says goodbye to reality” (Cartwright, 2007). Testing similar statistical corollaries, another experiment (Romero et al, 2010) has confirmed that the world indeed doesn’t

conform to what one would expect if it were outside and independent of consciousness.

Other statistical corollaries (Bell, 1964) have also been experimentally examined. These tests have shown that the properties of physical systems do not seem to even exist prior to being observed (Lapkiewicz et al., 2011; Manning et al., 2015). Commenting on these results, physicist Anton Zeilinger is quoted as saying that “there is no sense in assuming that what we do not measure about a system has [an independent] reality” (Ananthaswamy, 2011). Finally, Ma et al. (2013) have again shown that no naively objective view of the world can be true.

Critics have deeply scrutinized the studies cited above to find possible loopholes, implausible as they may be. In an effort to address and close these potential loopholes, Dutch researchers performed an even more tightly controlled test, which again confirmed the earlier results (Hensen et al., 2015). This latter effort was considered the “toughest test yet” (Merali, 2015).

Another intuitive implication of the notion of a world outside consciousness is that our choices can only influence the world—through our bodily actions—in the present. They cannot affect the past. As such, the part of our story that corresponds to the past must be unchangeable. Contrast this to the sphere of consciousness wherein we can change the whole of an imagined story at any moment. In consciousness, the *entire* narrative is always acquiescent to choice and amenable to revision.

As it turns out, Kim et al. (2000) have shown that observation not only determines the physical properties observed at present, *but also retroactively changes their history accordingly*. This suggests that the past is created at every instant so as to be consistent with the present, which is reminiscent of the notion that the world is a malleable mental narrative.

Already back in 2005, renowned Johns Hopkins physicist and astronomer Richard Conn Henry penned an essay for *Nature* (2005) wherein he claimed that “The universe is entirely mental. ... There have been serious [theoretical] attempts to preserve a material world—but they produce no new physics, and serve only to preserve an illusion” (p. 29). The illusion he was referring to was, of course, that of a world outside consciousness.

Thus from a rigorous empirical perspective, the tenability of the notion of a world outside and independent of consciousness is at least questionable. The key reason for resisting an outright abandonment of this notion is the supposed lack of plausible alternatives. What other ontology could make sense of the three basic observations about reality discussed in Section 1? In the next section, I will attempt to answer this question.

3 A simple idealist ontology

The ontology of idealism differs from physicalism in that it takes phenomenal consciousness to be the only *irreducible* aspect of nature, as opposed to an

epiphenomenon or emergent property of physical arrangements. It also differs from dualism in that it takes all physical elements and arrangements to exist *in consciousness*—solely as phenomenal properties—as opposed to outside consciousness.

Historically, idealism has had many different variations labeled as *subjective idealism*, *absolute idealism*, *actual idealism*, etc. It is not my purpose here to elaborate on the subtle, ambiguous and often contentious differences among these variations. Instead, I want to simply describe the basic tenets that any plausible, modern formulation of idealism must entail, *given our present knowledge and understanding* of the world. What follows is but a brief summary of a much more extensive derivation of idealism from first principles (Kastrup, forthcoming).

The defining tenet of idealism is the notion that all reality is in a *universal* form of consciousness—thus not bound to personal boundaries—arising as patterns of excitation of this universal consciousness. Our personal psyche forms through a process of dissociation in universal consciousness, analogous to how the psyche of a person suffering from dissociative identity disorder (DID) differentiates itself into multiple centers of experience called *alters* (Braude, 1995; Kelly et al., 2009; Schlumpf et al., 2014). Recent research has demonstrated the literally *blinding* power of dissociation (Strasburger & Waldvogel, 2015). This way, there is a sense in which each living creature is an alter of universal consciousness, which explains why we aren't aware of each other's inner lives or of what happens across time and space at a universal scale.

The formation of an alter in universal consciousness creates a boundary—a “Markov blanket” (Friston, Sengupta & Auletta, 2014, pp. 430-432)—between phenomenality internal to the alter and that external to it. Phenomenality external to the alter—but still in its vicinity—impinges on the alter's boundary. The plausibility of this kind of phenomenal impingement from across a dissociative boundary is well established: we know, for instance, that dissociated feelings can dramatically affect our thoughts and, thereby, behaviors (Lynch & Kilmartin, 2013), while dissociated expectations routinely mold our perceptions (cf. Eagleman, 2011).

The impingement of external phenomenality on an alter's boundary is what we call sense perception. The world we perceive around ourselves is thus a *coded phenomenal representation* (Friston, Sengupta & Auletta, 2014, pp. 432-434)—which I shall call the *extrinsic appearance*—of equally phenomenal processes unfolding across the dissociative boundary of our alter.

A living biological body is the extrinsic appearance of an alter in universal consciousness. In particular, our sense organs—including our skin—are the extrinsic appearance of our alter's boundary. As such, our brain and its electrochemical activity are part of what our inner life *looks like* from across its dissociative boundary. Of course, *both* the extrinsic appearance and the corresponding inner life are phenomenal in nature. They are both experiences.

A person's brain activity correlates with the person's reported inner life because the former is but a coded representation of the latter. We all inhabit the same world because our respective alters are surrounded by the same universal field of phenomenality, like whirlpools in a single stream. And we can't change the patterns and regularities that govern the world—i.e., the laws of nature—because our volition, as part of our alter, is dissociated from the rest of nature.

See Figure 1 for a graphical depiction of all this.

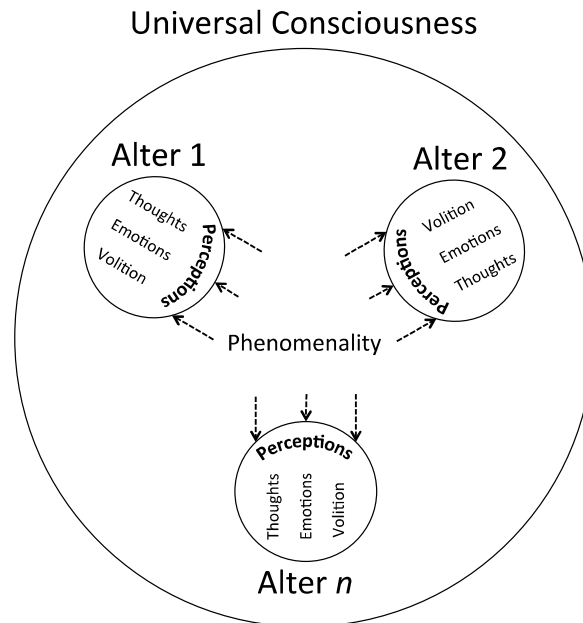


Figure 1. Idealism in a nutshell.

Clearly, all three basic observations about reality discussed in Section 1 can be rather simply explained by this parsimonious idealist ontology. Moreover, unlike physicalism and dualism, the ontology can also be reconciled with the empirical results discussed in Section 2. It thus offers a more promising alternative for interpreting the relationship between body and consciousness than physicalism and dualism. The question that remains to be addressed is this: if idealism is true, what can we then infer about consciousness after bodily death? This is what the next section will attempt to answer.

4 What idealism says about consciousness after death

The idealist ontology briefly summarized in the previous section asserts that the physical body is the extrinsic appearance—the *image*—of a dissociative process in universal consciousness. In other words, a living body is what dissociation—meant simply descriptively, not as something negative or pathological—in universal consciousness *looks like*. Therefore, the death and ultimate dissolution

of the body can only be the image of the *end* of the dissociation. Any other conclusion would violate the internal logic of idealism.

The reasoning here is rather straightforward but its implications profound. The hallmark of dissociation is “a disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity [and] emotion” (Black & Grant, 2014, p. 191). Therefore, the end of dissociation can only entail a *reintegration* of “memory, identity [and] emotion” lost at birth. This means that bodily death, under idealism, must correlate with an *expansion* of our felt sense of identity, access to a broader set of memories and enrichment of our emotional inner life.

This conclusion is the exact opposite of what our mainstream physicalist ontology asserts. Moreover, there is nothing in the popular dualist alternative—mainly found in religious circles—that requires it either. So idealism is not only unique in its ability to explain reality more parsimoniously and completely than physicalism and dualism, it also offers a unique perspective on death.

Circumstantially but significantly, much of the literature regarding near-death experiences (NDEs) seems to corroborate this prediction of idealism (Kelly et al., 2009). To mention only one recent example, Anita Moorjani (2012) wrote of her felt sense of identity during her NDE: “I certainly don’t feel reduced or smaller in any way. On the contrary, I haven’t ever been this huge, this powerful, or this all-encompassing. ... [I] felt greater and more intense and expansive than my physical being” (p. 69). It’s hard to conceive of a more unambiguous confirmation of idealism’s prediction than this passage, although Moorjani’s entire NDE report echoes the prediction precisely.

Moreover, as recent studies have shown (Carhart-Harris et al., 2012; Palhano-Fontes et al., 2015; Carhart-Harris et al., 2016), psychedelic drugs *reduce* brain activity. This suggests that psychedelic trances may be in some way akin to the early stages of the death process, offering glimpses into how death is experienced from a first-person perspective. And as we know, psychedelic trances do entail an unambiguous expansion of awareness (Strassman, 2001; Griffiths et al., 2006; Strassman et al., 2008), which again seems to circumstantially corroborate idealism’s prediction.

5 Conclusions

To make educated guesses about what happens to consciousness upon bodily death, one has to have some understanding of the relationship between body and consciousness during life. This relationship, of course, reflects an ontology. So the question of what happens after death can be transposed into the question of which ontology is most plausible for making sense of the world during life.

While physicalism is our culture’s academically-endorsed, mainstream ontology and dualism a popular alternative in religious circles, neither ontology seems tenable in view of recent experimental results in physics. Moreover, both

ontologies suffer from problems such as lack of parsimony or limited explanatory power.

A third ontology, known as idealism, overcomes not only these problems but can also be reconciled with the available empirical evidence. It elegantly explains the three basic facts of reality: (a) that brain activity correlates with experience, (b) that we all seem to share the same world, and (c) that we can't change the laws of nature at will.

If idealism is correct, it implies that, instead of disappearing, conscious inner life *expands*—whatever new phenomenology this expansion may entail—upon bodily death. This prediction finds circumstantial but significant confirmation in reports of near-death experiences and psychedelic trances, both of which can be construed as glimpses into the early stages of the death process.

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