

1 Introduction

1.1 Wonder and Intelligibility

Consciousness is a wonderful thing. Let me say it again: consciousness is a wonderful thing; it amazes us, it fascinates us, it fills us with wonder. I don't mean to belabor the obvious here—well, no, I take that back; I do mean to belabor what I hope is an obvious feature of consciousness. We are generally so busy living our conscious lives that we fail to notice the wonder of consciousness. But it is not difficult to notice it; a moment of reflection is all it takes to recognize what I hope is obvious to everyone. And we *should* notice it; we should take the time to appreciate and celebrate the wonder of consciousness. But if we are fully to appreciate the wonder of consciousness, we need to articulate what it is about consciousness that makes it so wonderful. It is easy to notice that consciousness is wonderful; it is more difficult to articulate what the wonder of consciousness consists in. This book is an attempt at such an articulation.

Of course, consciousness is not the only wonderful thing in the world, but consciousness is wonderful in distinctive ways. The physical world studied by the natural sciences is wonderful; in fact, the more science teaches us about the physical world, the

more wonderful that world seems to be. Science tells us about the hidden components and causes of observable physical phenomena, and what is so amazing about the physical world is how a small number of different kinds of hidden physical components and laws of nature are able to explain the wide variety of phenomena that make up the physical world. It is the hidden organization of the physical world that evokes wonder. But what is wonderful about consciousness is not to be found in its hidden nature or causes; it is right there on the surface. What is wonderful about consciousness is how its manifest features relate to each other. Specifically, what is wonderful is that these manifest features are such that we can know a priori that they stand in certain kinds of relations with each other. Typically, facts about the world cannot be known a priori, but consciousness is special: there are important facts about consciousness that can be known a priori.

I use the word “intelligible” to describe facts that can be known a priori. The idea here is that if a fact can be known a priori, something about the nature of that fact must explain why it can be known a priori; to describe a fact as *intelligible* is to say that it has the kind of nature that enables it to be known a priori. The use of this word seems appropriate because to know something a priori is to know it solely through the use of reason (intelligence), and perhaps a fact must in some sense exist in accordance with reason (be intelligible) if it is to be capable of being known by reason. I also say that a *thing* or *quality* or *feature* is intelligible when there are substantive facts about that thing or quality or feature that can be known a priori.¹

In this book, I shall argue that consciousness is intelligible: there are substantive facts about consciousness that can be known a priori. I do not claim that all facts about consciousness

can be known a priori; some facts about consciousness can be known only through introspection, and some facts about consciousness can be known only through scientific investigation. Nevertheless I claim that there are important facts about consciousness that can be known a priori, and I also suggest that the very intelligibility of consciousness is the source of its wonder.

The intelligibility of consciousness distinguishes it from phenomena that do not involve consciousness. We cannot learn anything substantive about the aspects of the world that do not involve consciousness merely by thinking about them. Rather, we learn about them by employing our senses to discover new things about them; through our senses we learn the nature of these new phenomena, how they relate to each other, and how they relate to the phenomena we already know about. There is nothing intelligible in the relevant sense about any of these phenomena; that's why we cannot discover them through employing our reason in the activity of thinking. But we can discover things about consciousness through reflective thinking. Specifically, given that we already know certain features of consciousness, reason can inform us of some of the relations between these features, for some of these relations are intelligible relations, and therefore reason can detect them.² (The relations are intelligible in the sense that it is an intelligible fact that the features in question stand in these relations.) We can learn things about consciousness merely by thinking about it, and surely that is a wonderful thing.

Consider the matter of causation, for example. As far as reason is concerned, any physical event can cause any other physical event; therefore we need to observe the physical world to discover the actual causes and effects of physical phenomena.³ But consciousness is different; I argue in chapter 3 that mere

reflection on the intrinsic nature of consciousness can inform us of some of the causal powers of consciousness, for the relations between these causal powers and the intrinsic features that ground them are intelligible relations. We might say that these causal powers of consciousness *flow* in an intelligible way from the relevant intrinsic features of consciousness: what consciousness can *do* is an intelligible function of what consciousness *is*.

I have suggested that the intelligibility of consciousness is the source of its wonder, and I can defend this suggestion only through the detailed examination of the intelligible facts about consciousness that I undertake in this book. But I can say right now that something about the phenomenon of intelligibility itself is apt to fill us with wonder. We are beings that possess a faculty of reason, and our use of this faculty is a major element of our lives. Let me suggest that the function of the faculty of reason is to detect and understand intelligible relations. Typically, we employ our reason in the activity of *reasoning*. When we reason, we are searching for intelligible relations between *propositions*. Perhaps we are thinking about what we can justifiably conclude on some matter based on what we already know, where a justifiable conclusion is just a proposition that stands in a relevant kind of intelligible relation to the propositions we already know.⁴ Given that reasoning is the typical employment of reason, we are apt to think that intelligibility is typically to be found in relations among propositions. And insofar as we think of propositions as “abstract” entities, as entities whose existence is somewhat removed from the concrete spatiotemporal world in which we live, we are inclined to think that intelligibility is not typically to be found in our own concrete world. This thought seems confirmed by the fact that we do not find intelligibility in the nonmental aspects of our concrete world. So when we do find

intelligibility in our world, specifically in the relations between features of consciousness, we are surprised and filled with wonder. We are amazed that there are elements of our concrete world that *make sense*, so to speak, that exist in accordance with reason.

So intelligibility by its very nature is a wonderful thing, but I think that the intelligibility of consciousness is wonderful for another reason. Consciousness is wonderful in virtue of its intelligibility, and insofar as consciousness is an element of our lives, our lives will share the wonder of consciousness. But other elements of our lives are wonderful, also. For example, we are rational beings, and we are also beings capable of knowledge. Not only can we obtain knowledge of the world through perceiving it, but through our emotional reactions to the world we can come to desire what is of value in the world, and thereby participate in this value. In chapters 4 and 5, I argue that consciousness is a necessary condition for these other wonderful elements of human life. Moreover, I argue that any account of why consciousness is needed for the presence of these other wonderful elements of human life must refer specifically to the intelligibility of consciousness. So the intelligibility of consciousness is wonderful not merely because the intelligibility of anything is wonderful but because the intelligibility of consciousness helps to explain the presence of other wonderful things in human life. Consciousness is important to us, both for its own sake and because it makes possible so many of the wonderful and worthwhile elements of our lives.

1.2 Intelligibility and Philosophy

My task here is to describe what it is about consciousness that makes it wonderful. What makes consciousness wonderful is

its intelligibility. So my task is to describe the intelligible facts about consciousness. This task is a philosophical task. So in this book I give a philosophical description of consciousness.

The task of describing the intelligible facts about consciousness is a philosophical task because, as we have seen, it is a task for our faculty of reason, and philosophy is a discipline that seeks knowledge through the employment of reason. It is an a priori discipline. Philosophy distinguishes itself from science precisely in this respect: whereas the scientist seeks knowledge of the world through empirical investigation, the philosopher seeks knowledge of the world solely through the employment of reason. The force of this “solely” should be understood with some care. The philosopher is not interested in ignoring the known empirical facts about the world, whether they are facts that have been obtained through everyday perception and introspection or through scientific investigation. Rather, the point is that the philosopher seeks answers to questions that do not seem to require *further* empirical investigation; they merely seem to require reflection (by reason) on empirical facts we already know. Philosophizing begins when we find something puzzling about familiar facts, and we seek to remove our puzzlement by employing our reason to discover intelligibility in these facts.

Philosophy is not the only a priori discipline, but I think it is fairly characterized as the a priori discipline that seeks knowledge of the intelligibility to be found in our world. Whereas the other a priori disciplines (e.g., logic and mathematics) are concerned with intelligible relations that hold between abstract entities, philosophy is concerned with intelligible relations that hold between entities in the concrete spatiotemporal world in which we live.⁵ I suggested earlier that we do not typically expect to find intelligibility in the world in which we live, but

philosophy embodies the perennial human hope that nevertheless we will find such intelligibility and succeed in articulating it. We articulate the intelligibility of a thing when we articulate what it is about that thing that enables there to be facts about that thing that can be known a priori.

My characterization of philosophy will no doubt be a contentious one, especially among philosophers themselves. Many philosophers throughout the centuries have objected to the view that reason can discover things about the world in which we live, a view standardly known as rationalism. I confess that I have never been able to see what the problem is supposed to be here. I know of no serious philosophical arguments that purport to show that reason cannot discover things about the world; it is difficult to conceive what such an argument would even look like (wouldn't it itself have to be an argument produced by reason purporting to tell us something about the world?). Regardless, I am not interested in giving a full-fledged defense of rationalism here; I hope a few brief remarks will suffice. First, I remind the reader that the philosopher as I conceive him is not ignoring the empirical facts; he is reflecting on these facts to discover further, nonempirical facts. Thus, in the case of consciousness, my claim is that as a result of introspection, we obtain knowledge of some of the intrinsic properties of consciousness, and then by reflecting on these properties, we can obtain a priori knowledge of the intelligible relations that hold among these properties. Certainly it is a familiar idea that reason can detect (intelligible) relations that hold between properties.⁶

The relations in question can be characterized as necessary connections between distinct properties (existences), and many philosophers object to the idea that there can be necessary connections between distinct existences.⁷ But this objection is

unfounded. Note as a preliminary point that the intelligible relations with which I am concerned indeed are necessary relations. When reason reflects on the intrinsic properties of consciousness with which introspection makes it familiar, what it is reflecting on is the essential nature of these properties, and when it discovers intelligible relations that hold among these properties, it is discovering relations that hold in virtue of the essential nature of these properties. So reason is discovering relations that *must* hold between these properties; it is discovering necessary relations. But I fail to see the objection to there being in the world necessary relations between distinct properties. The insistence that there *cannot* be such things just seems to be an unjustified a priori assumption about what the world can contain.

Ultimately my characterization of philosophy as the a priori discipline that seeks knowledge of the intelligible features of the world is to be defended in terms of its being the best description of what philosophers actually do. So let us remind ourselves of what philosophers do. Surely philosophers are not concerned merely with explicating our concepts; they are concerned with obtaining a priori knowledge of the world. This feature of philosophical activity is most salient in the area of philosophy known as metaphysics. Metaphysicians are concerned with finding intelligibility in the relations among the most general features of the world; they attempt to formulate accounts of these general features that will render intelligible the relations that hold among them. For example, they seek accounts of particulars and universals (and of instantiation) that render intelligible the idea of a particular instantiating a universal. It is no accident that metaphysics is often regarded as the core area of philosophy and that those who attack the legitimacy of philosophy commonly make metaphysics their special target. In metaphysics

the essential nature of philosophy is made manifest. Nevertheless it is not difficult to see that philosophers in other areas of philosophy are also concerned with finding intelligibility in the world. Consider moral philosophy. Moral philosophers, at least those who recognize the existence of moral properties, are concerned with finding intelligible relations between moral properties and nonmoral (e.g., natural) properties. We all know that moral properties supervene on nonmoral properties; moral philosophers wish to exhibit the intelligibility of these supervenience relations. Similarly, epistemologists are looking for intelligible relations that hold between epistemic properties and nonepistemic properties; when they ask a question such as what makes a belief justified, they seek an answer that will articulate an intelligible relation between the property of being justified and the nonepistemic properties of a belief that make it justified. Philosophers of art seek intelligible relations between aesthetic properties and nonaesthetic properties. I leave it to the reader to provide further examples. Suffice it to say that even today, philosophers seem to be rationalists in practice if not in theory. For the most part, philosophers prefer to remain reticent about what they do and how they go about doing it; nevertheless, whether they admit it to themselves or not, most philosophers do seem to be employing their reason to find intelligibility in the world.

Finally, my characterization of philosophy has the virtue of explaining the difficulty of philosophy. It is not easy to find intelligibility in the world, and so philosophy is hard. Nevertheless philosophical inquiry begins when we at least suspect there to be some intelligibility in some part of the world. The task of philosophy is then to pin this intelligibility down, to specify the relevant intelligible relations and the properties that stand in them. Or perhaps we can identify the intelligible relation and

even know that the relation is intelligible, but we need to engage in philosophical inquiry to determine what this intelligibility consists in or what makes the relation intelligible. Consider again the example of moral philosophy. We at least seem to know that moral properties supervene on nonmoral properties, and we suspect that the supervenience in question is intelligible, but we haven't yet succeeded in apprehending the nature of this intelligibility. We haven't yet specified what it is about the relations between moral properties and their subvening nonmoral properties that enables these relations to be known a priori. So the task of the moral philosopher is to specify the supervenience relations at issue (which moral properties supervene on which nonmoral properties) and to exhibit and articulate the intelligibility of these relations. Philosophical inquiry begins with partial grasps of intelligibility; such partial grasps are also forms of philosophical puzzlement. When the difficult work of philosophical inquiry succeeds and we find the intelligibility that we are looking for, our sense of puzzlement is removed, and we are left with pure, unadulterated wonder.

1.3 The Distraction of (Reductive) Physicalism

Philosophy seeks intelligibility in the world, and philosophy of mind should be no exception. There is intelligibility to be found in the realm of the mind, and philosophy of mind should focus on finding and articulating it. But, in fact, philosophy of mind has not typically focused on this task. I am not claiming that philosophers of mind have been looking for the intelligibility in the mind but for various reasons have not been able to find it; I am claiming that they have not even been looking for it. They have virtually ignored the essential philosophical task of finding