

NATURALISM AND THE EXPERIENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

Olga Markič*

Faculty of Arts – University of Ljubljana
Ljubljana, Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses varieties of naturalism and the fundamental disagreement about reductionism versus perspectivism. The central part of the article focuses on Andrej Ule's idea about experiential perspective and the possibility of naturalizing the mind. I must confess I am not able to pin down all his suggestions about how to accommodate experiential perspectivity in nature, but I certainly find his ideas thought-provoking and inspiring.

KEY WORDS

naturalism, consciousness, experience, reductionism, philosophy of cognitive science

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*Corresponding author, *η*: olga.markic@guest.arnes.si; +386 1 241 1104;
Faculty of Arts, Aškerčeva 2, SI – 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

INTRODUCTION

Andrej Ule poses a question about the possibility of naturalizing the mind, more precisely, he “examines whether it is possible to provide a coherent naturalist account of the emergence of the mind (spirit), construed as a plethora of mental abilities that are present in living beings” [2; p.501]. I would first like to shed light on two understandings of naturalism, ontological and methodological, and then point out the *fundamental disagreement about reductionism versus perspectivism*. The central part of the paper will focus on Ule’s idea about experiential perspective.

The question about the possibility of naturalizing the mind immediately opens two further questions: what do we mean by “naturalizing” and what do we mean by “mind”. In this article, I will leave the question about the mind aside and take a common sense understanding of the mind as a faculty of a person by which one feels, perceives, thinks, reasons, wills, remembers, desires, imagines etc. I think such understanding of the mind is compatible with the one provided in Ule’s article “Some Reflections on the Possibility of Naturalizing the Mind” [2], although he is giving a more precise analysis of the three related notions of consciousness, mind and spirit in his paper “Consciousness, mind, and spirit: three levels of human cognition” [3]. So, in order to prepare the ground let us first look at the notion of naturalism.

NATURALISM

Naturalism is a philosophical position based on considerations of American philosophers from the first half of the 20th century who aimed to “ally philosophy more closely to science” [4]. For example, John Dewey in *Experience and Nature* [5] argues against dualism and for the continuity of mind and nature. He provides his problem-solving account of intelligence with a naturalistic foundation that combines biology and psychology. At the same time, Dewey argues for the importance of experience and active engagement with the nature, stressing that knowing and thinking about the world do not exhaust human contact with the world – a point which bears special relevance for our discussion.

Although different philosophers interpret the term naturalism in different ways, there is now a common agreement that naturalism can be separated into two components: the ontological and the methodological. According to David Papineau, “the ontological component is concerned with the contents of reality, asserting that reality has no place for ‘supernatural’ or other ‘spooky’ kinds of entity. By contrast, the methodological component is concerned with ways of investigating reality, and claims some kind of general authority for the scientific method” [4]. An interesting and more detailed classification of different possible positions is provided by John Shook [6]. He views naturalism as “a philosophical worldview that relies upon experience, reason, and especially science for developing an understanding of reality ... [and maintains] that these three modes of understanding together shall control our notion of reality” [6; p.1]. This “triadic unity” thus filters out supernaturalism [6; p.1]. Because essential factors of experience, reason, and science can be coherently related in numerous ways, varieties of naturalism may be distinguished along three dimensions: the degree of ontological confidence given to science; the breadth of explanatory discretion given to science; and the number of scientific fields permitted to describe reality [6; p.1]. This results in 27 logically possible combinations of which some are incoherent, so 7 viable varieties of *naturalism are left*: Eliminative Physicalism, Reductive Physicalism, Exclusivist Liberal Physicalism, Non-Reductive Physicalism, Exclusivist Liberal Pluralism, Perspectival Pluralism and Synoptic Pluralism. According to Shook, all these viable alternatives gravitate to three great naturalisms: Reductive Physicalism, Non-Reductive Physicalism and Perspectival

Pluralism [6; p.15]. He suggests that the main issue is fundamental disagreement about reductionism versus perspectivism: “Does any science’s knowledge, and the reality it knows, have priority (epistemic and ontological) over all other knowledge and experience?” [6; p.16]. The Basic Idea of naturalism – “that we are natural creatures in a natural world” – is often taken as saying that “we must fit humans in austere scientific image of the world” [7; p.29] and thus of favoring Eliminative Physicalism and Reductive Physicalism. Advocates of the former (e.g. Paul Churchland, [8]) suggest that many concepts referring to mental states and processes are just illusions without real reference, while a reductionist, for example the famous neuroscientist Francis Crick, would claim that “the scientific belief is that our minds – the behavior of our brains – can be explained by the interaction of nerve cells (and other cells) and the molecules associated with them” [9; p.7].

It is clear that such approaches have difficulties with accommodating subjective, first-person perspective. So let us look more in detail into Ule’s analysis of the experiential perspective and his proposal to accommodate it in nature.

TAKING AN EXPERIENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

In his *article* “Mind in physical reality, its potentiality and actuality” Ule argues for the irreducibility of the experiential perspective. He condensed his view about the experiential perspective in the following thesis [1; pp.176-179]:

T9: For a living being, taking a distinctive experiential perspective means ordering all its feelings in accord with itself felt as in the “middle” of its feeling.

T10: This implies a distinct sensitivity to spatiotemporal patterns of occurrences. It can be realized by any being which is sensitive to different potentialities of events and processes in themselves and around them, and direct its motion in line with its perception of spatiotemporal patterns of occurrences, even without any explicit concept or explicit idea of space and time.

T11: My own experiential perspective cannot be translated or reduced to the impersonal or the third-person perspective.

T12: I suppose that the human ability to take a certain kind of the experiential perspective is based on our inborn dispositions for emotional and affective supported ways of drawing distinctions between ourselves and other people, and for imaginative anticipation of the reaction of other “objects” to our behavior. The primary and then secondary socialization of children then transforms and enlarges the basic ways humans relate to themselves.

T13: Reality (nature) includes a kind of “perspectivity dimension” or, to be more precise, the possibility of natural beings obtaining the experiential form of their “like to be X”.

T14: Taking a qualia level of the experiential perspective is the necessary condition for an organism to be sensitive to the higher-order processual potentialities within it and in its surroundings and to feel its place in the referential system of possible processes.

Ule’s notion of experiential perspective necessitates the existence of *qualia*, so it seems that the experiential perspective also provides an answer to the question of phenomenal consciousness posed by David Chalmers [10] and Thomas Nagel [11]. In “Facing Up the Problem of Consciousness” Chalmers starts with the following observation: “Consciousness poses the most baffling problems in the science of the mind. There is nothing that we know more intimately than conscious experience, but there is nothing that is harder to explain. All

sorts of mental phenomena have yielded to scientific investigation in recent years, but consciousness has stubbornly resisted" [10; p.200]. Or, as Nagel's puts it, "the fact that an organism has conscious experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to be that organism" [11; p.166]. Ule hopes that his proposal may be a good candidate for a heuristic hypothesis in finding a solution to the "hard" problem.

At a first glance, it seems that Ule has found a solution to both troubles, the subjective perspective *and* the qualitative aspect. Unfortunately, questions appear when we pursue the matter in greater detail. It is hard to understand what role is "perspectivity dimension" supposed to play in Ule's overall account. Ule seems to construe it as a "useful and suggestive metaphor of the trans-objective possibility of taking an experiential perspective for all entities in the spatiotemporal reality (which I call "nature"). [...] it is reasonable to assume that at least some living beings in the world share the same possibility of "moving" (developing) in the "direction" of the perspectivity dimension. They may actualize, according to this hypothesis, the possibility of taking the experiential perspective without necessarily doing so." [1; p.184].

It is also not clear how experiential perspective emerges in the world (cf. Vörös [13] on the problem of the origins). As Ule himself acknowledges "it is impossible to describe, explain or comprehend any point of view from a no-point-of-view. But how can we then explain the *coming into existence* of living creatures having their points of view i.e., living creatures that for them it is somehow *significant* that *they are* and in *what way they are*?" [1; p.183] It is suggested that, in the case of nonliving matter there exist "*protoqualias levels of experiential perspectivity*" [1; p.185], but at the same time Ule says that his hypothesis is not a variant of panpsychism [1; p.185]. It is hard to imagine how these two claims can be coherent.

I will conclude this short discussion with Ule's interesting hypothesis that "a mentally and linguistically articulated experiential perspective entails (among other things) an implicit utilization of an unlimited potential for logical operations on propositions (thoughts)" [2; p.509] that suggests an answer to the question of grasping propositions and thoughts in the space of logical operations. If this hypothesis is eventually vindicated, Ule promises to provide an explanation that many naturalist are looking for.

There seems to be a considerable inconsistency at work in Ule's paper: on the one hand, he argues that the experiential perspective is irreducible, but on the other hand, he is also suggesting that his hypothesis is better in naturalizing the mind than other closely related attempts (i.e. Bateson, Peirce and biosemioticians) that he critically examined. I must confess I am not able to pin down all his suggestions about how to accommodate experiential perspectivity in nature, but I certainly find his ideas thought-provoking and inspiring.

CONCLUSION

In his recent work [1-3], Ule is pointing to the experiential perspective as a crucial feature for understanding conscious (and also unconscious) organisms in nature. It seems obvious that the scientific approach to nature has no means to accommodate it properly. This results in a number of problems. Teed Rockwell in *Neither Brain nor Ghost* [12] provides a similar diagnosis as to why it so often seems that the object of contemplation is an unconscious thing: "When I contemplate an item, whether organism or machine, from the objective third-person point of view, it will, by the very nature of that perspective, seem like an object, an unconscious thing. But that doesn't mean that what I am contemplating is not conscious from its own point of view. Objectivity makes everything appear to be an object, including entities with subjective points of view. This is what accounts for both the illusion of solipsism and the hard problem" [12; p.132]. So, do we have to give up the idea of naturalizing the mind

and go back to the mind-body dualism or embrace some version of a scientifically problematic panpsychism? One way out this unpleasant dilemma could be a different conception of the Basic Idea of Naturalism – “that we are natural creatures in a natural world”. Instead of the above mentioned understanding – “we must fit humans in austere scientific image of the world” [7; p.29], McArthur proposed we understand it as saying “the world is everything that is the case” [7; p.45]. According to him, such an approach qualifies as a form of naturalism because it holds that “our understanding of the world and ourselves ought to be consistent with the findings of the natural sciences” [7; p.45]. Moreover, such understanding is able to accommodate normative facts into the natural world. It can also be viewed as a form of Perspectival Pluralism where experience and scientific knowledge present multiple perspectives upon the same reality and where sciences are not able to explain the mind fully. “The first-person situated and subjective perspective of consciousness is neither inexplicable nor incongruent with the third-person objective knowledge of the sciences, since all experience and knowledge is embedded in situated contexts. Our mental lives are correlated to some degree with nervous processes, scientific knowledge grows from our careful observations of the world, and our experiences of the world can be usefully coordinated with scientific knowledge.” [7, p.12] This is a position close to Dewey and American pragmatists. It is not without its own difficulties, of which the main one is probably the question of possible contradictions between some aspect of experience and some part of scientific knowledge. It is also not the only attempt to broaden the view about nature and try rethink the mind–nature relation. For a somehow similar attempts to naturalize phenomenology and phenomenologize nature see Vörös [13] and Kordeš [14] in this issue.

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