

«14» We need to understand this complexity; not to eliminate it. Thus, by eliminating the subject-object structure (tension), Gasparyan makes the same mistake as those who eliminate consciousness or the subjective experience. It is impossible to construct a science of consciousness while ignoring the subjective dimension, yet it would be meaningless and even pointless to ignore the fact that as humans we are part of the world, we are both a subject and an object.

Beyond the limits of consciousness

«15» Gasparyan rightly notes that “understanding consciousness in the way expected by most modern theories assumes doing what cannot be done: moving beyond the limits of consciousness” (§11). One must wonder, however, does this observation not apply to her article as well? The only way to answer this question is to assume something about consciousness. Indeed this might be the target article’s most serious problem: it begins from the very end – as if Gasparyan already knew something about consciousness and about the phenomenal subjective experience. It might be an intuitively appealing presentation; however, this intuition needs to be put to scientific examination. Yet instead of doing so, she offers a theory that, in essence, cannot be verified.

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RECEIVED: 20 MAY 2016

ACCEPTED: 30 MAY 2016

Where Is Consciousness?

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> Upshot • I join Gasparyan’s discussion on a possibility of having a theory of consciousness without ignoring the intrinsic self-referentiality of such an endeavour. My questions are: If we acknowledge the primacy of consciousness, is a theory of consciousness even possible? If so, what purpose would it serve? Explaining consciousness “from the inside” leads to some epistemological and methodological dilemmas, one of which is the encounter of phenomenal modalities that might not be accessible to explication. Gasparyan suggests that one such modality is the experience of differentiation. I try to clarify the terminology and suggest further research in this direction.

«1» One of the highlights of Diana Gasparyan’s target article – the idea to put distinction in the centre of the study of consciousness – is most intriguing, but, at the same time, it is also not quite new. The idea was put forward in the 1960s by polymath George Spencer Brown (1969), whose book *The Laws of Form* has inspired, among others, the authors of the autopoietic theory.¹ Spencer Brown grounds his work on epistemic logic on the imperative: “Draw a distinction!” He sees drawing a distinction as a condition and the fundamental act of cognition. In the absence of distinctions, one would be floating in an endless, shapeless void.² In general, it seems that Gasparyan agrees with Spencer Brown in concluding that without distinctions, the world would not be possible because “if everything is given as one undifferentiated flow, we can understand nothing” (§52).

1 | Varela (1979) saw Spencer Brown’s kind of formal logic as a perfect analytical instrument to be applied in the then developing autopoietic theory.

2 | Mystics might interject that letting go of distinctions is the very first step towards enlightenment, but let us leave this discussion for another time.

«2» The target article uses the term “difference” but I do not see a good reason for departing from Spencer Brown’s term “distinction.” Gasparyan uses the expressions “experience of differences” (§50) and “experience of differentiation” (§48), where the former sounds somewhat problematic; it suggests that the (experienced) differences are “out there.” Spencer Brown with his “draw a distinction,” on the other hand, meaningfully implies that the distinction lies in the hands of the beholder and is not a simple cognitive response to the contours of the “real” world. This view is closer to Gasparyan’s “experience of differentiation.”

«3» Perhaps it would be suitable to follow Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch (1991: 172; see also Kordeš 2016: 383) in choosing the middle way by introducing the term “experience of enactment of distinction”? This, admittedly clumsy, denomination better emphasises the blurred line between perception and action; between representing and inventing – a quality that the authors of the term “enaction” wanted to affirm and that is also noticed by Gasparyan in §52.

Hiding in plain sight

«4» The constructive role of the observer in the formation of distinction is perhaps best elucidated by the mind-body dichotomy, or better – the distinction between the experiential and the physical. It is interesting to notice how hard it is to pinpoint the former part of this dichotomy (i.e., the experiential), despite it being our most intimate feature. Perhaps the best definition of the experiential is that about which we can ask ourselves with Thomas Nagel “What is it like to be?” The question “What is it like to be the reader of this text?” is answerable. The answers can vary substantially; nevertheless, each one of them will describe at least some kind of experience. If we, however, ask ourselves “What is it like to be this computer screen?”, it becomes very hard to imagine the answer. The question therefore makes sense (is answerable) only when we are dealing with consciousness. One might therefore be tempted to describe experience as the answer to the question: “What is it like to be conscious?”

«5» It seems that we have a blind spot for the fact that experience is the most basic

and unavoidable medium of our being. Not only do we normally not notice how all our beliefs about ourselves and the world constitute experience; we do not notice that we do not notice. When we say “here is the screen,” it is entirely natural to omit the part: “I experience/see/think that here is the screen.” It is very hard to make ourselves notice that “here is the screen” necessarily presupposes experience, consciousness. This blind spot is related to what Edmund Husserl (1982) very aptly describes as the natural attitude: we organise, interpret and make sense of our experience with the constant help of a notion that all experience is the experience of something. This process of organising, interpreting and sense-making is so efficient and swift that it is not hard to overlook the medium into which it is inevitably submerged – consciousness.

« 6 » The blind spot of the natural attitude prevents us from noticing that the dichotomy experiential/physical is not a genuine dichotomy. A genuine dichotomy has to split the content space into two, if at all possible, non-overlapping parts. The pair experiential/physical, however, muddles two content levels: the level of experience, which is the primary medium of being, and the level of the physical world, which is a way of organising the experiential content.

« 7 » Let me point out that this is not a debate on the ontological existence of the physical world. Accepting the simple fact that we cannot perceive anything outside of our experience does not mean we have chosen a type of idealism, asserting that experience is primary and the physical world is but a frivolous play of mind. All we did (following Rene Descartes, William James, Husserl and other epistemologists) is notice the fact that experience is a medium into which we are immersed and from which we cannot escape.

« 8 » Enactment of distinction as the fundamental modality of experience can be compared to the development of a scientific theory. If the enactment of distinction is to lead to a viable image of the world, it has to acknowledge constraints. From the constructivist viewpoint, we are, in both cases, constructing a functional theory – a theory adhering to the available data in a tightest possible way. Our beliefs about the world are, much like a scientific theory, a map, not the

territory – they help us navigate. They are a way of organising experience in a meaningful and continuous way. Philosopher Paul Natorp (1912; see also Bitbol & Petitmengin 2013) has shown how the aforementioned blind spot leads to subsequent dichotomies, such as subject/object and “outer”/“inner.” According to Natorp, we select the “parts” of our experiential field that are invariable in relation to (inter)personal, chronological and spatial situations. He calls this process, which leads to the feeling of a stable objective (“outer”) world, “objectification.” What is left is subjective, “inner” experience. Interestingly, Natorp notices that the boundary between the two changes throughout life (usually the subjective gives way to the objectification). Natorp sees the physical world as a subset of the experiential,³ which seems exactly opposite to our everyday attitude, which makes us see experience as a subset of the physical world. It is important to notice that these two seemingly opposite views are not symmetrical. In the first case (the notion of a physical world arises as a way of organising the experiential landscape), we are not talking about the actual physical world. Rather, we need to talk about our belief about the existence of such a world. Belief is, of course, a type of experience.

« 9 » In our everyday “natural” intuitions, we overlook the experiential medium, which is the source of every possible perception, and accept the physical world as the foundation. If we overlook experience, what remains is a world filled with things. Some of these things exhibit behaviour that might hint at experience hiding behind it, but nowhere can we measure or clearly see this elusive entity. From this viewpoint, it is clear why, for a long time, experience did not belong to the scientific discourse. The rise of cognitive science forced researchers uneasily to accept the existence of this suspicious substance and to start looking for where and how it is hiding in the physical world. Experience chose a cleverer hiding spot than most cognitive scientists suspected: in plain sight. Everything is immersed in experience. Gasparyan, together with phenomenologists and the founders of second-order cybernetics, notices this immersion.

3 | In contemporary cognitive science, a similar view is held by Max Velmans (1990).

Can there be a theory of consciousness?

« 10 » Up to this point, I have used the terms “consciousness” and “experience” almost interchangeably. From the view of the naturalistic cognitive science, we could define consciousness as that feature of organisms that enables experience. More precisely, that enables phenomenal reports or some other kind of behaviour that might hint at the presence of a phenomenal world. At this level, we can only talk about behaviour – as there is no experience to be found in the physical world.

« 11 » There are at least three perspectives from which contemporary theories of consciousness try to approach their subject:⁴

Functional: What are its adaptive advantages and how has it (evolutionarily) come to be?

Explanatory: How does consciousness work or how does it emerge from the physical foundation?

Descriptive: What are the first-person features of consciousness?

« 12 » Explanatory theories attempting to naturalise consciousness have to deal with the major problem, namely the fact that the universe they are operating in does not contain the entity they attempt to explain. So, as Gasparyan notices, all that remains are attempts to explain consciousness away (\$5; Chalmers 2003). While searching for adaptational (and other) functional explanations of the emergence of consciousness might be interesting, it will probably not help much in understanding its essence.⁵ What is left, then, is the descriptive approach, which can only be done from the first-person perspective. The target article promotes this option and I wholeheartedly agree.

« 13 » Gasparyan does not clearly articulate the relationship between conscious-

4 | Here I partially follow Robert Van Gulick (2014). Güven Güzeldere (1995) enumerates even more levels of investigation that should be included in a theory of consciousness.

5 | The scope of this commentary does not allow for a more thorough overview of the very interesting and broad field of physicalistic theories of consciousness. For a very broad overview of views and theories, see David Chalmers's list at <http://consc.net/online/8>

ness and experience. If “consciousness is the experience of differentiation” (§48), I wonder, would it not be more appropriate to skip the “differentiation” part and start with “consciousness is experience”? Would such a position not mark the most fundamental level? As mentioned earlier, I am suggesting the relationship as: experience is what it is like to be conscious.

«14» In any case, it is the experiential realm that the target article sees as primary for the discussions on consciousness, and I fully agree. Accepting such a(n) (immersed) perspective of description, “theory of consciousness” (§25) does not seem to be the proper term. A theory usually tries to describe a phenomenon with categories that are broader than the described phenomenon. If we agree that consciousness is a medium into which we are unavoidably immersed, then designing a theory of consciousness would be as if physicists tried to design a theory of the universe. One attempts to describe the features of the universe (as seen from within), but that is not the same as a theory of the universe. For such a theory, one should be able to step outside the defined phenomenon and describe how it came into being (from something else) and how it relates to other entities (outside it). If we are discussing the all-encompassing medium, then such an endeavour is meaningless. I believe that Gasparyan is stretching the term “theory” a bit too far when she writes: “As such, the theory of consciousness is the theory of the description of consciousness rather than the theory of its explanation” (§25). Would it not be better to simply state that we are aiming for the description of the phenomenal realm? Such a description could, of course, contain categories, description of various first-person modalities, and perhaps theories of those entities.

Attending the unattendable

«15» The study of consciousness should be the study of consciousness as it presents itself, i.e., the study of experience. I especially agree with Gasparyan that second-order cybernetics would be the most appropriate epistemological foundation for such research. In the article “Going Beyond Theory: Constructivism and Empirical Phenomenology” (Kordeš 2016), I tried to

point out the benefits of cooperation between second-order cybernetics (as an epistemological model) and the empirical study of experience.

«16» The self-referential nature of studying experience is, in my opinion, one of the features where second-order cybernetics could offer an adequate epistemological framework. Nevertheless, the introduction of such a framework can by no means solve all the challenges posed by such research. Gasparyan’s article addresses an exceptionally important one: how do we deal with experiential modalities, which are not (fully) explicable? I find this to be one of the most important novel insights delivered by her article.

«17» Researchers in the field of so-called empirical phenomenology (Kordeš 2016) seem to have arrived at a (mostly unarticulated) consensus that it is possible – using appropriate techniques – to bring any kind of experience from the unattended fringe of consciousness to the focus of attention (Vermersch 2009). Considerations that some experiential phenomena cannot be fully explicated, however, are rare. The experience of enactment of distinction, discussed in the target article (under the term “experience of difference”) might very well be one of those elusive experiential modalities. Following the target article’s insight, I suggest serious consideration and further of the experiences that are intrinsically on the fringe of awareness. I refer to the phenomena that are, without a doubt, part of the experiential realm, but are not observable in the focus of attention. If the purpose of many empirical phenomenological techniques is explication,⁶ we are left with the question: How to study those parts of the experiential landscape, the principal quality of which is precisely that they reside on the periphery of attention? A deliberation on possible approaches to studying such phenomena would be a very important step towards understanding consciousness “from the inside,” and Gasparyan’s article seems to be one bold attempt in this direction.

6| Most prominent is Pierre Vermersch’s elicitation interview technique, formerly known as the explication interview (Vermersch 2016).

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RECEIVED: 18 JUNE 2016

ACCEPTED: 19 JUNE 2016

Theorizing Agents: Their Games, Hermeneutical Tools and Epistemic Resources

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> **Upshot** • The aim of my commentary is to support some of Gasparyan’s ideas and to reformulate them in a more constructive way in terms of both formalized hermeneutical procedures and networks and in the light of game-theory approaches.

«1» In her target article, Diana Gasparyan continues her search for a general theoretical framework relevant to modern consciousness studies (Gasparyan 2015). This time, she concentrates not only on the ontological status of the theorizing agent, but also on methodological aspects that should be attributed to theorizing agents involved in consciousness research. In my opinion, Gasparyan’s investigations have led her to the area where analytical philosophy meets phenomenology and hermeneutics for she ends up with self-description as a central epistemic concept; besides that, she finds the differentiation processes lying at the heart of the conscious life. These are all phenomenological themes. It seems to be right that the language of “second-order cybernetics” may play a bridging role between phenomenological and analytical styles of research. This gives us a chance to speak of a genuinely fundamental theory of consciousness (FTC), a brief outline of which is presented