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Reviews

Why red doesn't sound like a bell: Understanding the feel of consciousness by J K O'Regan; Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, 224 pages, £40.00 cloth (US $59.95) ISBN 978 0 19 977522 4

New streams of thought on consciousness

Perception holds a particular place in research to man's self-understanding. O'Regan's *Why Red Doesn't Sound Like a Bell* gives the reader an inspiring account of the nature and functioning of sensory perception and its relation to consciousness. Based on old philosophical problems and recent findings in the neurosciences, O'Regan sketches out a new viewing on both *seeing* and *feeling* in their relevance for understanding consciousness. O'Regan's critical assessment of different views on perception and their relation to consciousness is relevant to the expert, but it also provides an interesting read for the non-expert.

Throughout history, the subject of perception and its relation to consciousness has held great fascination for science and philosophy. Perception is so close to us that it can hardly be described as an external phenomenon: it does not only 'appear' to us, it also *overlaps with* ourselves. Perception thereby shows a double relation. One would be intuitively tempted to think that perception holds a somewhat passive relation to the world. Phenomena seem to impress on our senses in a causal fashion, and these in their turn somehow 'cause' certain images in the mind that determine our consciousness and possible conclusions of the reality perceived. This rather linear picture was already analysed and criticised by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. In spite of such longstanding criticisms of the 'naive' picture of perception, it still holds sway over Western thought till these days, specifically in the context of the emergence of psychology and the neurosciences. But of recent, findings and new approaches in the neurosciences have internally challenged this notion.

The notion one holds of consciousness is decisive of how one frames the nature of perception. There are at least three standard approaches that attempt to comprehend the fundamental nature, role, and functioning of consciousness:

1. The idealist conception of consciousness as essence. This view on consciousness is related to ancient Greek sources, Platonist philosophy in specific. It takes consciousness to be the core of one's identity, as the seat of the *Self* in relation to perception of the world.
2. The materialist conception of an equation of the mind and the brain. Here, consciousness is explained in terms of material functions and properties. It conceives consciousness as biologically determined. This view goes back at least to the 18th century philosopher La Mettrie, but a contemporary proponent is Daniel Dennett.
3. The phenomenological position of consciousness as intentional and relational. Philosophers such as Kant and Kierkegaard have laid the basis for this position which was later elaborated by Husserl. It takes consciousness not as a passive 'blank slate' onto which impressions are printed but instead as oriented towards what is perceived and, in some senses, even constructing what is perceived.

The neurosciences often take a materialist view on consciousness. The development of technology has been very influential for our use of metaphors for the mind and the brain. Clockwork mechanics, hydraulics, telegraph lines, and computer chips determined our understanding of the mind and the brain, but in this influence, they also restricted this understanding to deterministic and mechanistic frameworks of interpretation. Whilst productive in gaining insight in some aspects of the functioning of the brain, such a view has stood in the way of acknowledging some aspects of its wider context in terms of the relation to perception and the world perceived.

O'Regan opposes views from the second category on the basis of their failure to explain 'qualia', or the 'what-it-is-like'-ness of raw feel. He opposes the idea that feel is merely something that is generated by the brain through an external impulse. He sketches out an account of perception as intentional in nature, therefore positioning his views in terms of the third type of approach. The presupposition of the linear picture of the relation *reality – perception – consciousness* is now largely regarded to be flawed: the active nature of the brain as well as the sensory organs in

how we perceive the world is largely acknowledged in neurology. But this does not dismiss the fact that, even with this 'Copernican turn' for the Western worldview, it is still held to be objectively known and analysed how such systems function. O'Regan not only draws from a wide array of examples to illustrate the radical nature of this Copernican turn; he also embraces the necessary modesty this entails for the neurosciences themselves. In his choice of examples, he illustrates neuroscientific findings by practical daily life experience, thereby rendering the complicated area of perception as it is studied in the neurosciences accessible for a broader audience. He does not draw conclusions from these findings that would place perception in the world of 'the things out there', and always stays conscious of the subjectivity of sensory perception.

O'Regan states that several paradoxes that were until recently monopolised by philosophy, have entered the field of neurology, both as object of study and as problem for the epistemological status of that study. These paradoxes are connected to definition questions (entailing questions such as 'what is consciousness', 'on the basis of which criteria can we define consciousness', or 'to what phenomena do we restrict consciousness') as well as the distortion that certain 'findings', or at least conclusions on what consciousness is, may have for the presuppositions that make the science possible as such. These questions are very much embedded in our views of the *self*. As a neuroscientist, O'Regan is very much aware of the problem of the double nature of perception. He acknowledges the mystery of this double ontology of consciousness: as both something that can be studied (be it through neurology or philosophy) and the subject that is studying, perceiving, seeing, etc, respectively. O'Regan acknowledges the deficient attitude that is widely existent in neurology, of a mapping, or 'cartography', of consciousness.

In the history of Western thought, one can discern two opposing worldviews: one that affirms determinism and one that affirms free will. The question of determinism and free will was already prominent in the debate between Luther and Erasmus, came to be treated by Enlightenment philosophers such a La Mettrie in the interpretation of the mind as a clockwork, and has since taken a central position in both philosophical and scientific debate. Neuroscientific research touches upon issues of the relation between mind and body, and the status of these concepts, the nature of human identity, the age-old debate between determinism and free will. In recent years, neuroscientists often popularise their work by taking strong positions towards the problem of determinism. Whilst in philosophy this issue has, by now, been demonstrated as much more complicated than a mere duality between 'free will' and 'determinism', neuroscientists often fall into the trap of interpreting their work and its results as a confirmation of a deterministic worldview. So, although current advances in the neurosciences raise substantial philosophical questions about consciousness, they are often presented to resolve them by reducing them to a deterministic and mechanistic account of consciousness. A problem for the deterministic worldview that is so prominent in how the neursciences are often presented in the media is that one cannot see one's identity as merely something one *has*, but always also as something one *is*. The neurosciences find themselves in the impossible cross-over area of studying something in between having and being one's traits. Whilst philosophy is much richer in its views on human nature and personal identity, debates on neuroscience research remain rather formal, methodological, and thus inadequate. O'Regan provides for a much needed richer perspective on the neurosciences. O'Regan bases his views on the scientific state of the art in neurology—the true nature and significance of its results and on the insights provided by the history of philosophy. O'Regan does not make the mistake to view his work as an answer to age-old philosophical questions. He rather takes his work as complementary to such questions and their treatment. Although very much interested in earlier philosophical views on the problem of perception, he does not take a stark deterministic view on either perception or man as such.

The more dominant views on human consciousness such as the idealist view, the mechanistic view and the intentionalist view have a specific historic and philosophical background. The neurosciences take implicit and explicit positions towards such views, either confirming them or taking them as hidden epistemological ground. They are, however, in many ways not commensurable: a deterministic position excludes the possibility of intentionalism, and an idealist account of consciousness cannot be brought into accordance with a materialist account. Such worldviews also play an important role in how new insights in the neurosciences are received. The view one holds on human nature and its influence on one's (conception of) personal identity are crucial in one's view on how one evaluates the development and application of neuroscientific technologies.

O'Regan's intentionalist view on perception and consciousness serves to liberate the broader interpretation of the neurosciences from its mechanistic tendencies. For readers of *Perception*, O'Regan's *Why Red Doesn't Sound Like a Bell* provides for a well-argued criticism of and a strong alternative to deterministic perspectives on perception and its role in consciousness.

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