

The Mysterious Flame

Conscious minds in a material world

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November 19-20, 2005

The most direct experience of reality is that of consciousness or sentience. *Cogito, ergo sum* are the classical words of Descartes expressing this rock-bottom reality. I is, you is, we all is. Is, is, is. The very essence of existence, 'isity'. The author admonishes the reader that one should not confuse consciousness with the consciousness of consciousness, so called self-consciousness, or the second order consciousness so to speak, although as soon as you reflect on consciousness you are bound to confuse the two. Consciousness of the first order is very primitive¹, that of the second order much less so, and it is not clear whether it is present in other animals than man, or in very young children for that matter. As an older child when reading about past geological ages with their dinosaurs and other exotic life-forms I was struck by a certain sadness. All that richness of a most exciting world existing, and yet without consciousness there was no one to record it, to feel it, to make it 'really' exist. As a younger child one speculated whether inanimate objects, like rocks, could have a 'sense' of existence; i.e. a rudimentary consciousness. Such musings might strike a more mature individual as absurd, but keeping in mind the basic way existence is made itself manifest a rather natural absurdity. After all a rock exerts its existence. The logical problem with such an idea is the problem of identity and individuality. We tend to think of objects as well-defined entities, a chair, a piece of rock, even a cloud, this is after all the basis for counting, on the other hand each entity consists of sub-entities, which are entities on their own right depending on circumstances. Once an entity is conceived of as a unit, a table, a particular leg of that table, or even a particular atom in it, it exerts itself and is it thus endowed with a proto-consciousness of its own?

Classically there is a division of philosophy into a realistic one and an idealistic. The latter takes as a basis our consciousness, and conceives of the world as mental or spiritual, and matter is just appearances, shadows of the mental life. For such a philosophical view of the world, consciousness presents no particular problem, at least not a technical problem, because it is just given. As a mystery it is indistinguishable from the ultimate mystery. Why is there something rather than nothing?² The realistic approach makes the mind subservient to an outside reality which we perceive through our senses. This outside reality is conceived through certain Kantian categories such as space and causality, which makes possible science and reduction. Still there remains a division between the Self and the Outside, some of which, due to social instincts, are sympathetically viewed as other Selves. The idea of reducing the Self to that of dead inert matter is something most

¹ The author speculates whether it would even be present in ants

² This question posed by any reflective child famously begins Heideggers 'Metaphysics', which understandably goes downhill from then on.

people feel an instinctive repulsion against. As a child I instinctively balked at the idea that I as well as chairs and tables³ was made out of atoms. Later as a young adult I took exception to the idea that my thoughts and emotions could be reduced to biochemistry, although I also found a certain comfort in such a detached view, as it seemed to soften existential angst. The materialistic approach has much going for it. It takes a hardnosed unsentimental approach to existence and it has enabled understanding through systematic reduction and brought about technological advances, which even when resented have been the object of marvel. For a long time there was seen a gap between the living and the dead and there was conjectured a special living force, whatever that was ⁴, that was necessary to breath life into the inert. The great triumph of 19th century science was to erase this barrier, both in laying the foundations for a chemistry of biology and the postulation of a principle of evolution that did away with the hypothesis of design. As a purely intellectual edifice the Darwinian theory of evolution is superior to any rivalling theory of creation, not only in its richness of manifestation but also in its simplicity of explanation⁵. Anyone that questions it is considered to be a prophet of darkness, and Darwin is more than any other scientist thought of as a deity among his disciples⁶ This by itself, without regard of the specific circumstances, may be source enough for a sceptical questioning. Thus the prevailing orthodoxy is that consciousness is no different from life, only one of its many manifestations, and as such merely an emergent feature of very complex systems (whatever that really means⁷). This is a materialistic point of view that runs into severe difficulties when attempted to be implemented in any detailed and explanatory way. The result is that most thinking people, whether they admit it or not, adhere to the awkward compromise known as the mind-body duality. The world can either be viewed from the inside and the outside. The two views are fundamentally different, yet there seems to be some correspondence between them, not only do they work in parallel, but with direct and mutual influences. This view, proposed among other by Descartes is a philosophical embarrassment, resulting from a desire to have it both ways being reluctant to really

³ the standard outside objects of a philosopher, to which one may add blackboards and chalks

⁴ Analogies with the ubiquitous ether easily come to mind

⁵ When I first encountered Darwin as a mature individual I was struck by the fact that elegant ideas could also be found outside the realm of mathematics

⁶ Newton was deified through the 18th century as the beacon of enlightenment, and among certain political groups in Social Sciences a similar deification was attempted for Marx in the 20th century. Newtons standing is no longer as exalted as it once was, although he remains a giant on whose shoulders we are still standing; while Marx nowadays tends to be viewed as a clown, whose proper place is to be found among the fraternity of his namesakes.

⁷ A typical illustration of emergent structures are words. The individual letters mean nothing, yet their combinations are pregnant with meaning, none of which is discernible in the individual components. (The matter is different when as in poetry sound is added to sense, as the sound of words employ their basic constituencies in a non-formal way). Admittedly the emergency of meaning does not really take part in the combinations of words as such, but in the minds of the readers. In the same way one may construe the emergent mind in the mindless grey gushy matter of a brain to take place in a divine one. Thus our conscia are but reflections of divinity. A beautiful religious picture whose intellectual coherence should not be scoffed at.

confront the problem.

McGinn's stand is that the mind-body problem is insoluble, not in absolute ways but for humans, that our minds, our brains, our intelligence is not powerful or adapted enough for that kind of question. As a true philosopher he is more interested in the limits of knowledge than knowledge itself, although the former is obviously a part of the latter, albeit necessarily in an unconventional form. McGinn has chosen to present his thesis in simple and ordinary language with the technical apparatus reduced to almost nothing. So while a more serious-minded writer (or if you prefer the term a more pompous one) may fill many a page with arcane descriptions of neural antics, McGinn instead quotes scenes from Star Trek and similar Science Fiction stories. Such an approach exposes the shortcomings of a writer more mercilessly than a more academic one in which triteness of thought so much more easily gets hidden under an irrelevant barrage of empirical descriptions. Personally I have to admit to a certain distaste for Science Fiction, a distaste that at times has puzzled me, because after all Science Fiction is about striking ideas and should consequently be in the center of literature rather than among its more despised and outlying suburbs⁸. On the other hand I should commend the attitude of the author, the issues involved are very fundamental and non-technical, and could be brought across to a large segment of the population. The real great problem is that the matter having been thought so much about, not only by professional philosophers, it is very hard to come up with really original ideas, incidentally (purposedly?) illustrated by the many aforementioned references to popular fiction. So any reader that dips into the book in order to obtain some new fundamental insights is bound to be disappointed. (And here we see the advantage of a slightly more high-brow approach, the reader can at least learn something interesting about neural pathways and the organization of the brain, even if it happens to have very little relevance to the real problem.)

McGinn believes that the materialistic approach to the explanation of the phenomenon of consciousness is inadequate. It is, however, not really clear what the compelling logical, as opposed to emotional, arguments against it really are. If you look at the brain, with all its intricate neural connections you form no idea of how it can possibly generate consciousness, no matter how long and hard you stare at it. (As McGinn points out over and over again, how could 'meat' generate consciousness, why not livers and kidneys, or galaxies for that matter, if we are thinking of sheer masses of interrelating matter⁹) But brains are not to be looked at but thought through. To take a rather far-fetched analogy. Consider the decimal expansion of say $1/65537$ it will result in a seemingly random succession of digits, in fact 65536 of them, before they start to repeat themselves. You can think of this unfolding of the sequence as a manifestation of the 'true' nature of the prime 65537 that would never be apparent would you just look at the prime, no matter for how long. You simply have to go through the process¹⁰. If that example does not satisfy you, take a

⁸ This is indeed a rather interesting phenomenon. Obviously social prejudices are at play. On the other hand literature is not only about ideas but in shaping them (giving them 'gestalt'), and here most of science fiction fails with its stereotyped descriptions, and more seriously inconsistencies. Those aliens too often sound like Americans with funny hats

⁹ maybe they do, but we have no clues as how to interpret indications thereof

¹⁰ One may also look at this as a metaphor of genetic information becoming manifest as an organism.

prime containing thousands of digits; and if mere sequences of numbers do not excite you, they can be coded for all kinds of things that might. The point is that there often is much more than meets you eye. I do not mean that I am not in sympathy with the author, only that I fail to find compelling logical arguments.

To highlight the materialistic approach to consciousness would be to ask the question. Would a 'perfect copy' of a brain produce an artefact that also has 'consciousness'? The essence of a materialistic approach is that like causes have like effects, without which science as we know of it would be impossible¹¹. McGinn does not ask the question pointblank, but he comes very close to it several times. The problem is what do we mean by 'perfect copy'? One obvious answer would be to copy the brain atom by atom, putting every atom in its precise position. Such a copying would not be practically possible of course but we are not concerned about practicalities but principles. The problem is that a brain is a dynamic thing constantly in motion, so the ordinary space of position is not enough, we must also consider the phase-space of all velocities as well. This was well understood by 18th century physicists, and Laplace is well-known for his dictum, that an intelligence that would be able to know all the positions and velocities of all particles in the universe would in an instant be able to compute all previous and all future configurations. In particular in one single moment everything is in principle known, so much for free-will. However, in modern physics, as is well-known, the simultaneous precision of position and momentum is an impossibility. At the smallest levels of the material world, determinism is no longer an issue, and hence supposedly arises the possibility of free-will¹². A more interesting problem of copying is one by simulation. That is to discern the essential properties of the brain and make an 'isomorphic' copy. No one has so far isolated the 'essential' features of the brain so the experiment cannot yet even be made precise¹³. But of course simulation is not the same thing as understanding.

What is the nature of our inadequacy? McGinn is not very clear about this point, which is understandable, any pinpointing of a deficiency is the first step in overcoming it. Thus one should always be careful to state too precisely what can never be known. A classical example is that of August Comte who claimed in the middle of the the 19th

As to the more mathematical content. The sequence of integers is not random but highly determined. The whole process is of course like all algorithms rigidly deterministic, thus exhibiting lots of hidden structure that can be predicted. Indeed the random features of the sequence can be characterized by those whose demonstration is tantamount to the entire calculation of the sequence

¹¹ The reverse of this is that unlike causes may have like effects, thus establishing a definite time-arrow. The future may be determined but the past is not. Events of the past may simply leave no trace, and in effect this is like they had never happened. If you oppose that idea, you do implicitly propose that the past injects into the future, that everything that has ever happened can in principle be reconstructible if you are patient enough. In particular all episodes of the past are knowledgable. This is clearly not a scientific fact but a philosophical paradigm that I have never seen persistently pursued.

¹² To be subjected to random forces rather than to be determined one is more appalling to many people, witness the propensity for the notion of intelligent design, although Darwinism may be thought of as a purely determined process

¹³ One would suspect that due to certain physical restrains, say the velocity of light or the size of atoms, such 'copies' cannot be made too big or too small

century that the chemical compositions of the stars could never be known, when in fact those now belong to the most understood objects as far as chemical composition goes¹⁴. Could it be due to an ignorance of all the laws of physics? After all before the discovery of radioactive decay, i.e. the possibility of converting matter into energy, there was no physical explanation of how the sun could have produced enough energy to shine for all the many millions of years necessary to provide for natural evolution. Darwin was reported to be very troubled by this fact, contemplating to throw his theories into the dustbin. Could there be physical laws that we either do not know or are unable to formulate that could explain consciousness? You could always speculate, and the author does. Maybe concomitant with Big Bang there was another Bang, this time of mental energy. Sometime in the course of evolution organs, like brains, were enabled to radio communicate with the parallel universe, and thus consciousness entered. Obviously an outrageous phantasy, and meant to be it. Or that before the Big Bang the universe was very different, not consisting of 'space' as we know it, but of other 'dimensions'. Those other 'dimensions' have survived the Big Bang as fossils of an earlier universe and do account for consciousness as we know it. As you read this you experience a moment of unease, not entirely obviated by the retraction a couple of pages later. Is the author a crack-pot, is he seriously going to propose such wilful phantasies as a serious contribution to the debate? It is of course naive to take such suggestions literally, they are clearly meant to be taken ironically; however, in many ways the phantasies are similar to the outrageous speculations of cosmologists, and thus it is hard to divest yourself of the suspicion that the author wants to join in the fun as well, without necessarily having the credentials to do so 'legitimately'¹⁵. The objections are trivial, more seriously though is that such fanciful speculations divert the issue. Are we not after all hinting at the impossibility of a purely materialistic explanation no matter how many physical laws we have at our disposal? Is the impossibility not much more fundamental than just a deficiency of physics which supposedly in the future could be rectified? And is there really a rational explanation of consciousness available, would we only change our notion of space? The author makes a big point out of the fact that everything material is tied down to space, has spatial extension and is constricted by spatial considerations. (Only one thing at the same place.) Consciousness is non-spatial,

¹⁴ McGinn takes as a random example the exact number N of dinosaurs that ever existed. In a way it is a silly example, as it presupposes that we can in principle identify a set of well-defined dinosaurs. Apart from that, imagine that everytime a dinosaur is born, it excrecates a very heavy and stable nucleus, in fact the excretion of such a single nucleus will be taken for synonymous with the birth of a dinosaur. Those nuclei slowly works themselves into the middle of the Earth, and many eons of times later into the future, the earth as a life-less clump of matter is encountered by a civilization that takes the earth apart, finds the heavy nuclei and having nothing better to do counts them and records the number N . The scenario may be thought silly but as such it is in character with the type of science-fiction examples the author loves to display. He may be charmed by this one as well, and he surely is welcome to. The point is of course that the kind of example of the non-knowable that is exhibited is logically trivial, but of course it is also simple to get across. The kind of no-knowledgable of the conscious will be of a much more fundamental and interesting kind.

¹⁵ The cosmologist supposedly has some expertise as well as some 'calculational experience' of a frustrating kind, thus he has a 'license' to let his mind wander, after all it is firmly anchored.

but so are many abstract concepts, involving the laws of physics. Are all abstract concepts contingent upon consciousness? Frege would turn in his grave? Numbers surely existed before Big Bang, McGinn argues, and I cannot but be in sympathy with him there. And so did equations, cosmologists argue even more audaciously in their attempt to explain the spontaneous creation of something out of nothing. But consciousness did not, unless we are going to take a very mystical view of cosmos. A view which may find many adherents but meet with scorn among our more serious friends.

What is consciousness, and how do we know that others have it? The first question is obvious in a sense that makes the second much less so. The essence of consciousness is subjectivity, we can only know of it through its subject, anything else is sympathetic conjecture. Thus the problem of constructing a machine run by an algorithm that simulates consciousness does not seem to be that insurmountable. After all very powerful chess-playing programs have been constructed, and it is said that it is much easier to program standard responses in a typical interchange between a patient and his psychiatrist, than it is to construct a robot that moves around and picks up boxes. When we are inferring consciousness in other individuals we are clearly drawing on additional resources. Maybe we are simply 'programmed' as social beings to endow our own kind with inner experiences like our own? Furthermore even if we trust in the consciousness of our fellow beings (sometimes against very powerful evidence) we cannot really compare different conscia. A standard example is what appears red to me may appear blue to you. Or maybe not as a color at all. The point is that the question of comparison is meaningless¹⁶. There is no such thing as a knowledge of another mind 'an sich', what we have is the notion, so familiar to a mathematician, of isomorphy. There is no intrinsic difference between isomorphic things. As long as you are as consistent with blue as I am with red, there will never arise any discrepancy. It is this isomorphic correspondence that makes communication possible. The subjective experience as such remains private, and it is the business of literature to evoke it.

So once again what is consciousness? It is maybe above all a awareness of sensory stimuli. The sensation of the color red often being cited as an example. As a child I was taught how the ear worked. One thing lead to another, but how on earth was that final sensation produced? It seemed to me that the explanation could go on for ever, getting me no closer to the goal. The experience of frustration is not unique, it is common among children and philosophers. Bertrand Russell explains it in so many words when he expresses his infantile puzzlement at what allows the striking of a light-ray on the retina to eventually be translated into a bone fide conscious experience. Consciousness also involves awareness of pain and pleasure, happiness and unhappiness, it also comes to play when you endow things with meaning, make decisions, even when things click into slots and you suddenly understand something. Some of the things consciousness becomes aware of are simple and fundamental, other things highly abstract. The one who is blind is deprived of visual consciousness, other people may be deprived all their life of the consciousness of love, or of a deep religious epiphany. We say that such people have led impoverished lives. But, McGinn argues, there is more to consciousness than meets the eye. It has depth.

¹⁶ Frege, among others, repeatedly refer to the incommensurability of different conscia. Frege, however, seems to claim that the idea of such basic concept as number does not differ from individual to individual

True, but this is not true of consciousness but of your self, your mental life. Consciousness is a thin membrane, in fact it is like a surface with no depth. There is depth to your self, but not to your consciousness. What is out of the focus of consciousness is not part of it. The unconscious is by definition not the conscious. The unconscious may have depth, unsuspected such, while the consciousness is transparent, because what is not transparent is not conscious. Thinking is not primarily part of your consciousness, you may be conscious of your thinking, but usually only a very small part of it, preferably its conclusions. It may very well be argued that the most interesting things that goes on in your mental life are not conscious. But that would have no significance to you, would not some of its implications be known and appreciated by your consciousness. As to a description of consciousness and its unconscious adjuncts as they reveal themselves indirectly to introspection, I know of no rival to the works of William James. Their elucidation and description is more of a literary than a scientific project. This has been underscored by successors to James, I am thinking of course of Freud but even of his rival (and caricature) Jung. With Freud your self becomes aggrandized by your subconscious, something that appears far larger and deeper, not to say more significant than your conscious self. Unsettling as it may be, it is still a comfort and reassurance. You are more than that thin film of consciousness that flicker so precariously. With Jung that unconscious self even merges with a huge collective unconsciousness, and the great psychic peril for you is to maintain your individuation as not to drown into that ocean. The ideas of Jung, suggestive as they may be to a young adult, nevertheless strikes a mature reader as irresponsible mysticism, a kind of confused religious revival. True Jung was critical of Freuds reductive and 'drily' scientific approach, and would have been aghast at a mere biochemical explanation of the workings of the mind. Yet, his phantasies can actually be given some sense, if not exactly the kind he would have savoured. Natural selection has endowed us humans with very similar brains and very many innate mental characters. We have much in common, which with some poetic license very well could be designated as a common unconsciousness. And the problem of individuation, clearly could be construed as a battle for a self to be maintained against innate but inchoate urges. We now are ready for my main point. There seems to me to be no principal problem of a purely materialistic explanation of our unconscious. The way we instinctively and unconsciously progress sensory information or form sentences. We acquire habits, those tend to be automatic, and although part of us, like our limbs, they seem (like those) mechanical. As I type on the keyboard, sometime I forget consciously some series of keystrokes. But my 'fingers' remember. I only have to let them work undisturbed and things will work out. Of course it only feels to be in the fingers, obviously the automatic behaviour resides in the brain. But there are no problems of explaining its existence as that of a series of nerve connections and firings (the standard types of schematic neurological explanations available to James). The explanation may be complicated, and for most of us too boring to be truly savoured, but there is no resistance to the fact that this is an explanation. In the same way we can easily reconcile ourselves to neurological explanations as to how our memories are stored and even retrieved, but not how they are experienced and savoured. We can even accept biochemical explanations of our urges, not as such and how they are experiences, but how they are stimulated and provoked. McGinn is right. Most of our mental life is estranged to our consciousness, it is more deeply inbedded in our

brains so to speak. But instead of providing a link, a bridge, to an ultimate explanation of consciousness, they make the mystery even deeper. Consciousness is like the surface of water, it is not part of the water, no matter how close we come to it, we do not reach it, as long as we stay in water. Water may be explained, but not its surface.

The reason that consciousness cannot be explained is not a question of lack of knowledge but a matter of categorical confusion. Consciousness is a subjective experience and hence can only be explained subjectively, because any explanation has to make sense to the consciousness of which it purports to explain. Can you at the same time explain the veracity of say a mathematical proposition as well as why you believe it? Any true explanation of consciousness would be a self-reference, a contradiction in terms. Consciousness cannot understand itself, just as there is no reason that the brain should be able to understand itself, or we in a deterministic world would come to the conclusion that the world is deterministic. McGinn argues, only half of his tongue in his cheek, that our inability to fathom our own consciousness is due to limitations of our brain, and that there could be beings that have no difficulty understanding consciousness (but whose? Their own or ours?). To me this smacks too much of imagining a universe ruled by a different sense of logic than our own, where numbers behave strangely. Nothing wrong with flights of fancy, the problem is that when you change the ground rules too drastically, you no longer have anything to go by. Such a different world would be far too different for us to comprehend, and if you try, you invariably would fall into the trap of an extended anachronism, making aliens speak with American accents. The trap of the science-fiction writer.

So do we care whether consciousness can be rationally explained or not? Philosophers do, and other idle thinkers, but what are the practical consequences? Popper teaches that one should never ask 'is'-questions, only 'how'-questions. The former invariably lead nowhere, while the latter are focused and practical and incidentally lead to insights. There are clearly much interesting work to be done on the brain, in fact all unconscious processes seem to be come within the circle of scientific inquiry. We may never be able to understand what it is to be a given person, just as little we can experience the sense of a bat without being one. Yet, ultimately anything short of it can be illuminated.

Finally let us dwell briefly on the morbid question of death, briefly touched upon by the author. The awareness of death seems to be almost innate. It is a deep awareness of the frightening prospect of non-existence, to which religion only adds a desperate hope. The awareness of death, or its manifestation as a stubborn denial, is often sensed as a fundamental fact subjected to no serious scepticism. It also makes the ultimate connection between our spiritual self and dead inert matter. Even if you doubt that you are sprung out of the earth, you do not doubt that you will end up in it. That it is a return is but a sentimental touch. This is why the darkness that preceded us never scares us as much as that which is to follow, in spite of the fact that so many philosophers¹⁷ have tried to comfort us. (Philosophy sometimes has the aim not only to instruct and sometimes to proscribe but occasionally also to console.) Because before we seem to have existed in a dormant stage to be woken up at birth (or conception). As long as we did not exist we were invulnerable to the vicissitudes of existence, virtually indestructible. However, this is in the nature of an optical illusion. Our future existence was not ordained, on the contrary,

¹⁷ Schopenhauer among the moderns, but no doubt scores of ancients expressed the same idea

(unless you take a strictly deterministic point of view), the smallest disturbance would have prevented it to take place¹⁸ Thus after your death you are in the same position as before your birth. Consciousness is just a phenomenon of the universe. It happened before, it will happen again. New conscia will emerge. As long as you are tied to a specific identity you cannot experience others, when you are freed, there are no longer such obstructions. But of course it will not be 'you' who is being reborn, there will be no connections at all to the former 'you'. Still a 'new' existence might be one involving true misery, this might after all be the essence of most existences. Intolerable suffering. In a way this point of view may explain the Hindi idea of transmigration, and also the idea that suffering actually concern us all, all of consciousness. When tied to a happy existence you are protected from the direct experience of the suffering of others, when not there is no such shielding. This is pretty obscure, on the verge of mysticism, but I believe, not quite without some obscure sense. To make the point a bit clearer. If you are really suffering I believe the idea that it is you who is suffering is subsumed into the very much more powerful that suffering is being had. It becomes impersonal, an affront if not to the universe, at least to some ethical notion of decency. In a similar way I wondered as a child why I was stuck in my persona. Could I as easily not be someone else, like the boy walking down there in the street? After all from the point of view of existence neither of us were privileged. Feeling me, was just one manifestation of the universe, feeling the other would be equally justifiable. And as a child you may wonder at your own luck as being born a human, not a lowly animal. Those are real feelings, and they point at some consciual panteism, as if a remnant of a pre-individuation stage in your developemnet. As an adult such musings strike you as very naive and illogical on the level of a egrarious mixing of categories. Yet such a detached view of your own personal consciousness seems to be a prerequisite for a scientific and material understanding of it¹⁹

So why is the thought of eventual extermination so intolerable for many of us, at least those of us, who face the fact squarely? It produces, especially in adolescence a terror, so powerful as only to be suffered for a brief moment. It is an existential terror, and its nature would be as powerful, even would death be millions of years into the future. It does enhance the awareness of consciousness to its limits. On one hand the very nature of the terror, being concerned with a distant future not a pressing immediacy, it highlights the continuity of conscious identity. The 'I' at the future moment of death, is the same 'I' at the present, thus the total identification. Normally we only pay lipservice to the idea of identity throughout time, we believe in it of course, yet we tend to be creatures of the moment, even if we might nostalgically look back to happier days or project ourselves into the future in wishful phantasies. Personal invariance through time is usually questionable,

¹⁸ The butterfly effect, first I think formulated by Poincaré in his speculations of how little it would have taken to prevent the conception of Napoleon, and by implication the profound consequences that would have had on subsequent history and the continued conception of others.

¹⁹ Maybe McGinns speculations about alternative intelligences would not be so sterile after all. One could imagine some kind of common consciousness shared by many separate bodies, allowing a transference of the type the infantile mind may find congenial. More common is the speculation of different conscia inhabiting, simultaneously, not sequentially, the same body, with all its intricate consequences as to free-will.

and in principle we might even be as removed from the immediate sensations of our past selves, as we are of other sentient beings. Of course we remember our past selves, but our experiences of those memories may be as distinct as the experiences of others. What I now experience as red I once experienced as blue. The comparison is as useless. The dread of death collects and focuses the personal identity. Also awareness of death brings about a sense of vertigo²⁰, of actually existing, and thus being doomed to termination. This heightened sense of consciousness is so intense and scary, that our ordinary sense of consciousness only feels like a lulled dream in which nothing really is truly real. An intense awareness of reality brings about a sense of unreality. We are creatures of habit, and to have our habits brutally ripped apart, is truly upsetting. Our most cherished habit is that of being alive, consciously being alive. Yet dying is to return to the state before conception. It also means a total obliteration, not just a cessation. The latter is easier to grasp and to accept, death being a kind of interminable sensory deprivation, being cut off from the outside world forever, nothing remaining but memories. A claustrophobia with its own interminable terror. It also indicates that pure consciousness without external stimuli is a terror quite by itself.

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²⁰ In fact suffering from vertigo is a phobia that most closely connects with the fear of death. (At least to those afflicted by it.) Death is like falling helplessly to your extinction. There is nothing more palpably connected to instant brutal death than falling from a great height. You are until the moment of impact completely unharmed. There is no gentle gradualness to extinction. It is instantaneous and makes up a true singularity