

Seminar IRH-ICUB

Consciousness and Cognition: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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convenor Dr. Diana Stanciu

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Dr. Diana Stanciu

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Dr. Diana Stanciu (https://irhunibuc.wordpress.com/visiting_scholars/), the convenor of the research seminar and series of lectures *Consciousness and Cognition: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, specialises in (early) modern philosophy and theology and their aftermath, with a focus on the reception of ancient and medieval authors regarding topics such as consciousness/ conscience, grace, predestination and free will, virtue, sovereignty, rational religion and toleration. She published and taught extensively on the above-mentioned topics both at home and abroad. Lately, Dr. Stanciu has been working on the relationship between neuroscience/ cognitive science, on the one hand, and philosophy/ theology, on the other hand, while concentrating primarily on the theme of consciousness.

The 'Explanatory Gap' and the 'Hard Problem of Consciousness': Some Historical Antecedents

The idea behind this lecture is actually the idea behind the entire research seminar on consciousness and cognition in an interdisciplinary context as I see it. The 'explanatory gap' (Levine 1983, 354-61) regarding consciousness – the fact that conscious subjective experience accompanies specific functions of the brain and the neural/ computational mechanisms behind them, but it cannot be completely explained in terms of these functions/ mechanisms – remains the 'hard' problem of consciousness in cognitive science/ neuroscience nowadays (Chalmers 2010, 3-8).

In order to transcend this 'explanatory gap', some postulate conscious experience as a fundamental entity of the physical world such as mass, charge or spin (Chalmers 2010, 3-8; Hameroff 2005, 118-119). But they still define subjectivity as 'arising from physical processes' (Chalmers 2010, 16-18). Others look for the 'chemistry of consciousness' even when religious practices are involved (Fuller 2008, 75-87). And others concentrate on 'emergence'/ 'downward causation' as 'a third way beyond the dichotomy physicalism/ dualism' (Clayton 2004, 1-4). Still others ponder on 'emotions'/ 'feelings' and their bearing on consciousness in 'homeostasis'. Thus, body/ brain, matter/ consciousness are observed as they 'fully' and also 'mutually'

interact via chemical/ neural pathways in an integrated organism (Damasio 2000, 39-40, 54-56, 138-42, 303-304).

But the 'hard' problem of consciousness remains still unsolved and, in my view, it is only interdisciplinary research that can elucidate why and how that happens. My pursuit is thus to integrate the latest findings in neuroscience/ cognitive science within the framework of the history of philosophy/ theology dealing with issues such as complexity, emergence, free will and purpose. I am suggesting that the 'hard' problem may be actually 'inherited' from the development of cognitive science/ neuroscience and could be better explained by re-discussing it in its initial intellectual milieu.

Historically speaking, consciousness was explained within a theological/ philosophical framework and related to both the transcendent and the transcendental and to both knowledge and moral action. The 'explanatory gap' appeared when consciousness was seen exclusively in a scientific framework, when both the transcendent and the transcendental were removed and cognitive processes were studied (by analogy with computers) as abstract 'programmes' in the 'hardware' of the brain. It may happen then that science cannot solve this 'hard' problem alone. An interdisciplinary approach may at least explain why and how that happened and how future research on consciousness could transcend the existing lacunae.