

Jan Krajc, 'Modern Theories of the Mind and Spinoza's Legacy': Master's Thesis

Supervisor's Report

This master's thesis is concerned with the philosophy of mind and the nature of consciousness, and it seeks to derive insight from the work of Daniel Dennett, as expounded in *From Bacteria to Bach and Back* (2017) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the philosophy of Benedict Spinoza in his *Ethics* (1677). It is argued that Daniel Dennett's approach to mind, with its rejection of intuition (12-13) and its use of 'thinking tools' (14) derived from cultural evolution by memes, provides the basis of a powerful materialist understanding of consciousness and mental phenomena. Nevertheless, the author recognizes two critical weak-spots in Dennett's account: the problem of 'what-it-is-likeness', or the subjective view (27-28) and the problem of the unconscious, particularly of the complex process of neurosis, as understood by Freud (45-46). While the problem of the subjective view can at least be partly remedied, according to the author, if we accept Dennett's fictive account of the self, based on the memes of language (36), the problem of the unconscious remains. The author then argues that Spinoza's system, which he interprets (along with Michael Della Rocca) to be panpsychist (60), can be of help. It can, he argues, explain complex unconscious mental events (61), and give an account of the transition from competences to comprehension: 'it is not a simple question of coming to awareness but rather an interplay between bodies, minds, in/adequacies, and various kinds of affects. It is with this complexity ... that we would be able to bridge the lack in complexity in regards to the unconscious and, ultimately, explain away Freud's example of neurosis' (62).

The plan of the thesis is to be commended for tackling the difficult problem of consciousness and the unconscious in Dennett's philosophy, and for bringing the philosophy of Spinoza to bear on the problem. The author sets forth many salient parts of the philosophy of Dennett and offers a (partial) defence of Dennett against the well-known critique of Nagel. The author holds that Nagel's objection to the materialist viewpoint can be met and repudiated if we understand how the acquisition of language allows the emergence of a self that can generate 'what-it-is-likeness' (36) as it gives rise to the 'user-illusion' (37).

This claim is, however, hard to assess as the author does so little to describe what the 'user-illusion' amounts to, and how language is able to generate it (37). It is also far from clear that Nagel's problem is directly concerned with the self rather than with the qualitative dimension of experience, or qualia. The point is, surely, not that consciousness necessarily involves self-awareness, but that it necessarily involves subjective states that are excluded from the objective eye of third-person science. Further confusion is generated by the author's own dissatisfaction with the answer

to Nagel that he finds in Dennett, a dissatisfaction expressed later in the thesis (e.g. 46). Overall, the author needs to explain the very compressed thought that is expounded on pages 36-37, as in its present form it is barely intelligible.

Regarding the problem of the unconscious, there is no doubt that Spinoza's philosophy, with its parallelism and panpsychism, offers a positive acceptance of psychic activity beyond the conscious sphere. However, the crucial explanation of how Spinoza goes beyond Dennett and enables the transformation of competence into comprehension to be more than just a conversion of unawareness into awareness (61-62) needs to be set out with clarity and detail, and without the use of metaphor ('mental being almost rubble' etc). It is not clear how Spinoza's understanding of unconscious psychic states is equipped to accommodate Freud's special problem of neurosis. All I can take from the passages in question is that Spinoza's view of unconsciousness is complex and so it is able to deal with the complexity of Freud's problem of neurosis. Since the relation between Spinoza and Freud is one of the core claim of the thesis, I see this as a fundamental problem.

One reason for the unclarity regarding the role of Spinoza is that the treatment of the problem posed by Freud, found on pages 45-6 is, itself, highly opaque. The peculiar difficulty with neurosis should be set forth in plain language in a separate section, so that the reader understands exactly what the philosophy of Spinoza is being called on to explain. Nor is it clear how Freudian neurosis should be somehow linked to Nagel's question of 'what-it-is-likeness'. The author states, in this regard, that: 'One might say that [decisions concerning neuroses] render our minds into states in which the responses to the objective inner and outer phenomena make it seem like it is genuinely something like to be us' (46). But I am not sure what this means, and therefore I am unable to discern the link between the two criticisms of Dennett, based on the work of Freud and Nagel, that the author thinks are especially challenging. Since this is another key part of the central thesis, I again see this as a fundamental problem.

As supervisor, I certainly believe that the basic plan of the thesis is promising. I believe that the project has potential, and that the current text might be usefully treated as a first version. In its present form, however, the explanation of key concepts and arguments is seriously deficient, and the central line of argument is beset by unclarity, particular in the places indicated above. I therefore regret to say that I do not believe that the thesis is ready to be defended. Rather, I suggest that the author works on making the crucial arguments in the thesis clear, at the points indicated above, so that a revised text might be submitted for defence at a later date.

James Hill, 28.08.24