Geoff Lee argues for a view he calls “deflationary pluralism”: the view that a number of physicofunctional properties are as significant as consciousness. The types of significance he has in mind include natural significance, a narrower scientific significance, epistemic and normative significance, and significance in grounding concepts. In particular, if there can be robots that are functionally isomorphic to us (as in the example of Star Trek’s Commander Data), the issue of whether these robots are conscious is not substantive on Lee’s view because there is no fundamental divide in nature between our conscious states and their functionally isomorphic states, whether they are conscious or not. On Lee’s view, what Commander Data should have said at his trial is, “Who cares whether I am conscious or not since my alternative to consciousness is just as good as consciousness.” And if we can save ourselves from a degenerative neural disorder by having our brain slowly transformed into a Data-like brain, nothing of any real value will be lost. Lee uses an analogy to life: a robot that is not alive can have physicochemical properties that are just as significant as life; so the issue of whether some creature—for example, a lobster—is alive or whether it has the robot quasilife property is not substantive.

Crucially, Lee is not denying an explanatory gap. That is, even if we knew the physical basis of my current experience of red, we would not know why it was the basis of an experience of red rather than of green or no experience at all. Lee notes that the explanatory gap might exist but reflect an epistemic limitation of humans rather than a fundamental divide in nature. Perhaps intelligent aliens could know how to close the explanatory gap for humans even if humans cannot understand its closing. Further, as Lee notes, consciousness could in principle reflect a fundamental divide even if it is subject to a conceptual analysis that vitiates any supposed gap.

Lee’s point depends on a distinction he makes between states that are “locally significant” and those that are “globally significant.” Our conscious states might be different from our unconscious states that are produced by, for example, subliminal perception, but this significance would be local in that it applies to two different kinds of human states but may have no general significance. To take a real example of putatively
unconscious perception, subjects were asked to complete the stem rea- with the first word that came to mind so long as that word was not just presented on the screen. If the word “reason” was flashed on the screen subliminally, subjects were more likely to use it to complete the stem (doing the opposite of what the instructions required), whereas if the word was flashed visibly, subjects were less likely to use it. In humans, there definitely is a difference of kind between conscious and unconscious states, but on Lee’s view, that is a difference in local significance, and it doesn’t show that human conscious states have a “special glow” that functionally equivalent robot states do not have or that there is the kind of natural difference between human and robot pain that can ground a normative difference. Such a significance difference would be “global” in his terminology.

In a companion piece to the article in this volume, Lee (2014) mentions Siewert’s (2014) argument to the effect that consciousness is epistemically significant. Siewert’s argument appeals to a blindsighted patient who can “guess” at high degrees of reliability, nonetheless lacking knowledge. But, Lee argues, the blindsighted patient has locally insignificant visual properties, so there is no rationale from this case to a necessary role for consciousness in justification. A zombie might have states with what Lee calls “weak doxastic significance” (Lee 2014 which genuinely ground “process rational” transitions), even though the blindsighted percepts do not have weak doxastic significance. As Lee notes, an alien with no conscious states could have two distinct kinds of states that are the functional analogues of both the blindsighted patient’s sighted and blindsighted states, with the same normative disadvantage for the analogues of the blindsighted states.

Lee’s basic argument for deflationary pluralism is that according to reductive materialism, consciousness has a real definition in physicofunctional terms. But there is no reason to think that the physicofunctional property in terms of which consciousness is defined in this real definition can be seen—from a third-person point of view—to be any more fundamental than the realizations of functionally equivalent states in robots or Martians that we can stipulate to be zombies. There is no reason to think that, from a third-person point of view, our realizers are any more significant than those of robots or Martians—in the sense of global significance. It is this demand for third-person ratiﬁcation that he thinks sinks inflationist reductive materialism.

Lee gives a “master argument” for deflationary pluralism. The key premise is the third one:

The significance of a complex property is determined by its complex nature (perhaps in addition to the physical facts that provide its context of instantiation if it is context sensitive).

By contrast, my view is that consciousness has a first-person nature and a third-person nature, and the first-person nature is (is identical to) the third-person nature: there is just one nature that can be approached from the third or first person.
is third personal or first personal is not the nature of consciousness but our mode of epistemic access to it.

Substantive issues about whether this view is coherent have been discussed in connection with the Max Black argument against physicalism (Block 2006; White 2006). The basic dialectic is this: for it to be true that consciousness is identical to a physicofunctional property, there must be a mode of presentation of consciousness and a mode of presentation of the physicofunctional property that ground the identity statement. But the issue then arises as to the ontological status of the mode of presentation of consciousness. If it is physicofunctional, then there must be some sort of a priori analysis of it in physicofunctional terms, in which case consciousness is thus analyzable and deflationism about consciousness holds. The premise I reject is the one that says that if the mode of presentation is physicofunctional, then there must be an a priori analysis of it.

Putting aside the Max Black argument, the doctrine that the first-person nature of consciousness is identical to the third-person nature justifies what Lee refers to as the “top-down” epistemology in which the result of reflecting on consciousness from the inside shows that the third-person nature of consciousness must be significant because it is identical with the first-person nature, which is significant. Lee holds the contrary “bottom-up view” because he asserts that the significance of a property is a function of its real definition. What he calls the “bottom up view” could be titled “hegemony of the third person.” He argues that view entails that the mind-body identity thesis just mentioned (that the first-person nature is identical with the third-person nature) is false, because significance is not a matter of our epistemic approach to a significant property but rather of the nature of the property itself. Lee says the alien who knows the physical nature of our consciousness knows everything about it, so how could there be some special knowledge available from the first-person point of view that the alien doesn’t have.

On my view, reductive physicalism requires no such hegemony of the third-person point of view. The first- and third-person concepts pick out the same property. Lee notes that significance is a fact about a property that is not tied to how one picks it out. I agree with that, justifying the “top-down epistemology”: the first-person point of view shows that consciousness is significant even if that significance is not available from the third-person point of view.

Here is an argument that the alien can appreciate that there is something in the first-person point of view that is not fully appreciable from the third-person point of view: that is, a way of seeing that human states might have a special “glow.” When the alien discovers what consciousness is in the human brain, he finds—let us suppose—that it is responsible for our judgments of the wondrousness of consciousness, our judgments of esthetic worth, our moral condemnation of injury, our moral approbation of pleasure. He finds, further, that these value judgments and value-laden behavior flow naturally
from the human neural realization of the consciousness functional role. He finds that it would be possible for him to make a functional duplicate of us that also makes these judgments, but to do that, he has to build in a simulation of the link between our neural realization and these judgments, whereas in humans, the neural state underlying consciousness automatically leads to aesthetic value, condemnation of injury, judgments about mate desirability, judgments of worth of wines, judgments of the wondrousness of consciousness, and the like. It would be reasonable for him to speculate that human consciousness could have a significance that can be fully appreciated only from the first-person point of view. The Martian might say, “I am impressed by the fact that the human neural realization of the functional role of consciousness naturally leads to these various kinds of judgments of value, whereas all the other physical realizations of that role require me to artificially build in links to the physical basis of judgments of value.” The Martian would be rational in concluding that there may be something about the human realization of consciousness that justifies those esthetic and moral judgments.

Lee says, “If our hyperinformed Martian can’t see the relative naturalness of high-level properties, why think that we can?” My reply is that the Martian could see that there might be something we can know and he cannot in a special way via first-person access.

References


