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An Account of Conscience from Self-Consciousness

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Abstract:

Philosophers, in the past, have suggested that human conscience could be something non-material that guides from a super-human stance. However, new research in neuroscience suggests that it is a part of self-consciousness which is experienced by us due to the connectivity of various neurons in the cortex in our brains.

Keywords: *neurons, cortex, soul, consciousness*

1. Consciousness

Saying that one is conscious; simply means that one is aware or alert. Knowing that one is alert does not mean that we know one's state of consciousness. Here consciousness means bodily experiences and perceptions.

We can focus our consciousness, like our attention, to anything around. We can also focus it on our thoughts and with memory we can connect our current consciousness to the past one. However, in this sense, we cannot fully know other persons. We can only imagine others' consciousness, depending upon how much we know about them.

2. Brain and Consciousness

Bruce Hood writes that our brain weaves external world experiences into a coherent story. It fills in the missing information. It guesses. Scientists do not know how a physical system like the brain can produce the nonphysical experiences, like the consciousness itself.

There are 3 major types of neurons in the brain. Sensory neurons respond to information from the senses. Motor neurons relay information for our movement outputs. Majority are the interneurons which connect the input and output of the brain into an internal network. This controls the memory and the higher thought process.

Collection of interconnected neurons, produce surprising complexity. Neurons communicate with each other by sending electrochemical signals through connecting fibers. The neurons are packed into a 3-4 mm thick layer on the outer surface of the brain; cortex. Most of the higher functions, that make us human, rely on what's happening in this area.

In the brain, most neurons are densely packed in the back, in cerebellum which controls movements. Cortex has a fifth of the neurons but these have much greater connectivity, with much longer fibers that join together different widely distributed populations. This 'communication' is the secret of the power of the cortex. It integrates information from diverse areas. Out of these rich multidimensional experiences, comes the conscious self. Without activity in cortex, consciousness is lost; and also 'self'.

3. Self-consciousness

According to the Longman English dictionary, 'self' means the type of person you are, your character, your typical behavior etc. It includes your body and all that it entails.

By being self-conscious we mean 'being conscious of a self'. 'Self' stands for the body and mind. Self-conscious can mean self-recognizing: aware of awareness. We can understand self-consciousness as self-knowledge. It is our knowledge of the psychological and social context in which we come to know ourselves.

In simpler words, self-consciousness stands for, being aware of one's body, thoughts and what one thinks of oneself and others. It is because self's awareness is also vis-à-vis others. It further includes an awareness of what others think of one.

4. Conscience

The word *conscience* is considered as made up of two Latin words: *scio* and *cum*. The former meaning "I know" and the latter 'with'. In that sense, it means that I know (something) with (someone else). In simpler words 'conscience' stands for a shared knowledge with someone else. Besides someone else, the knowledge can be shared with oneself also. Scholars take it to mean thought and mind. Now, the knowledge, of which one is aware, is of the world around and also of one's own thoughts.

In English language, conscience stands for our judgments of what we know. In Milton's words "My umpire conscience". Jeremy Taylor, the cleric of the Church of England wrote in the seventeenth century "God rules in us by his substitute, our conscience". Thus, conscience can be taken to mean as 'that', which is within us and judges us correctly on moral issues.

Longman dictionary of contemporary English confirms that, by saying that conscience is 'that part of your mind that tells you whether what you are doing is morally right or wrong'.

5. Body-Mind Dualism

Plato, the Greek philosopher was of the opinion that humans are constituted of a material body and non-material soul. The soul is pure and 'knows' right from wrong. Its abode, when not in a human body, is in the realm of forms, which are perfect in every respect. This is what, it seems, Jeremy Taylor alludes to, in the foregoing paragraph, when he considers conscience as the substitute of God.

Rene Descartes, the seventeenth century philosopher, argued that the proof of our very existence lies in a 'self'. This self, is a thinking thing and further that only our thinking confirms our existence. It is because our senses, which belong to the material body, can deceive us. The self, Descartes argued, is non-material and gives us our perfect reasoning because it is God-given. Therefore, according to Descartes, we have in us, something perfect and immaterial, which is completely trustworthy. It can, thus, be argued that our conscience is either the self itself or derived from it.

6. Self-consciousness to Conscience

Sensory neurons receive the information from our senses, about the outside world. If this information concerns moral issues, the interneurons compare this information with what is already stored in memory. A judgment is made on the moral aspects of the information, for example, when we see or hear about a bribe being exchanged. This is because we have an idea of what a bribe entails, and its negative social and economic impact. On the issues, where morality is well defined, and understood by us, the judgment is straightforward.

How do we explain conscience? We have direct knowledge of our own consciousness but our knowledge of ourselves is connected to that of others. This leads to 'how should we treat them'. According to Bruce Hood, our cortex thinks, controls and then labels the thoughts and actions as moral or ethical. It also provides a 'self' illusion which is 'socially' created. Therefore, Hood argues that our actions are not ethical or moral in themselves. It is the cortex, which values society and guides our drives.

Neuroscientists tell us of mirror neurons. These get activated in our brain when we see others' reactions to stimuli. For example, we imitate when we see someone wincing in pain. We experience other peoples' feelings, in real life or in theatre or movies.

Conscience, by this reasoning, is not a non-material thing as suggested by Plato or Descartes. Rather this is our own self-consciousness, judging our thoughts and actions, as they would be judged by our society.

7. References

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