

# Motivating the P-world

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December 22, 2013

## 1 Two sources of perplexity

I am not sure if this memory can be said to be accurate, but it is certainly vivid, and fits with my impression of how I was as a child. I am about 9 years old, and I am perplexed by a question that seems to open up an abyss. The question is not difficult to articulate: “Why am I me, and not someone else?”. It could have been prompted by the ghastly moralising so characteristic of the strongly Catholic society that was Ireland in the 1970’s. Primary school children were encouraged to bring in a penny on Fridays “for the black babies”. The black babies were portrayed as utterly miserable helpless beings who lived lives of squalor. The Biafran civil war and attendant famine were in the news in what was probably the first widely visualised human catastrophe, thanks to the novelty of television. Children who didn’t eat their vegetables were likely to be shown the error of their ways by being told how lucky they were. There were so many starving children in Africa whose situation contrasted undeniably with the lot of snot-nosed Irish kids. I doubt we felt guilt, but I think a kind of guilt was the intended emotional effect, as it still is in pictures of the poor and destitute used by charities for fund raising. It was hard not to wonder sometimes, “Why am I me, and not that kid?”.

The abyss that threatened did not arise from guilt or smugness. It arose because I believe I could already see that there were two ways this question could be approached. The first was interesting, but unthreatening. It had to do with the question of alternate realities. We swim in questions of possibility, and we make choice after choice, believing that in so doing we are steering our world, and hence the entire universe, down one path or the other. Any child could see that there was more than one possible world. Children, and indeed adults, are not natural believers in pure determinism. It takes a peculiar kind of steely obstinate pessimism to believe that your sense of agency and ability to choose is a chimera, and that you are actually ineffectually witnessing the unfolding of a predetermined and immutable cosmos. So it is not hard to imagine that there are alternate versions of reality that are logically plausible, but that never came to be. I am not that kid, in much the same way that I did not choose to kick the dog. I could have, but I didn’t, and the world has to be one thing and not all possible things. Viewed in this way, I was, indeed, lucky to be Irish and not Biafran in 1970.

But there is another way to consider the question that I was at least dimly aware of, and it seemed to pose problems that nothing could solve. This was not a hard problem, it was an impossible problem. Instead of asking why am I not someone that doesn’t exist, some character of fiction, possible, but not actual, I could just as well ask “Why am I this actual real existing person, Fred, and not that actual, real, existing person, Jack?”. To see why this question is so

much harder, I only had to try to imagine a contrary set of affairs. In this imaginary world, I am looking out through Jack's eyes, acting as Jack, living as Jack, but over there is Fred, looking out through his own eyes, living as Fred. In such a world, there is clearly something "that it is like" to be Fred. In fact, it is, by hypothesis, exactly what being Fred was like to me. To believe that this was an alternate reality, and not the reality that actually obtained, there had to be something different about it. But I could see no difference, not the tiniest of discrepancies, that distinguished the two. The little logician inside my 9 year old body reasoned that if two things are the same in absolutely all regards, then they are token identical. Of course I didn't express it like that, but I simply had to stop myself transferring some little feature of me, here, now to hypothetical Jack, to see that I was failing to conjure up a possible world that might have been, but wasn't. I was conjuring up this present real world. It seems as if there was a logical bar to wishing I was some other real person. I could not make the thought coherent.

It is perplexing to stumble across a thought you cannot think, that you are nonetheless thinking, as a 9 year old. But I got over it. The perplexity remains, however, and I return to the problem now, curious about its form. I now believe that the difficulty that lies at the heart of this simple problem, so simple a 9-year old could see it, is a deep difficulty that demands developing insights into the nature of time, consciousness, and the self. Good questions should be posable without leaning too heavily on erudite literature and fine distinctions drawn in arcane traditions. Good questions should be right there, for anyone to ask, enjoy, and wonder at.

So it is with my second, related, source of perplexity. If anything, this issue seems to my addled mind even more obvious, and yet it is not easy to express. I wish to understand why it is so difficult to talk about the ongoing present experience that pertains to a single individual. Language seems to have its limits here. On the one hand, what I wish to name could not be more obvious. I look around from where I stand in this world. I see a world around me from a particular perspective, and I say "this!". But in this case, that word, "this", does not work as it usually does. There is no part of the world as it appears to me that I am picking out against some background. Rather, it is the entire phenomenological domain of a single subject that I mean. What a mouthful of words for that which is not only manifest, but, in some sense, that which is everything!

Two words might be suggested that I find worse than useless. These are "mind" and "consciousness". Neither word manages to refer to the domain I am talking of. There are traditions within which the notion of a phenomenological domain can be taken as a given, and then there are traditions, primarily scientific traditions, within which such a notion needs constant re-definition, as it is unclear to many what is being referred to. Interestingly, the domain of psychology, stretching as it does from atheoretic approaches to providing support in life issues, to strongly empirically based scientific traditions of measurement, theory, and modelling, does not have a clear or reliable relation to the notion of a phenomenological domain.

And so I will attempt to provide a working definition of that domain that eludes language, and then turn to the issue of why it is so difficult to treat rigorously and linguistically. I introduced it as the "phenomenological domain of a subject", and let me now expand upon all that by leaning very heavily upon the notions of "here" and "now" as they mean something to a specific subject. Everything that can be said to be immediately present to an experiencing subject will be included, and nothing else. Thus, not a "cup", but "this cup as seen/felt/heard from this location at this time". Everything that exists in the first person, and nothing else belongs in here. This is clearly not co-extensive with either of the terms "mind" or "consciousness", though it bears an interesting relation to the swarm of concepts pertaining to both of those. I will give this specific concept a

name for the sake of brevity. I will call it the P-world, where the “P” can help to point to its phenomenological nature, but also the fact that we are talking about that which is conventionally assumed to be personal, and private.

The P-world is the domain comprising the entirety of the here and now of a single subject.

The reader may now rightly object that I have presented the domain of the solipsist as if it were unquestionably real. Touché. The P-world is undoubtedly solipsistic in its construction. However in what follows, I will not assume that the P-world exists at all. Nor will I be defending its elimination. I will, instead, point out that many of the terms we use to describe ourselves necessarily imply some kind of P-world, but that problems arise if we take those P-world commitments too seriously. Indeed, my first source of perplexity can now be re-expressed as arising from the assumption that Fred and Jack have distinct and whole P-worlds. In trying to imagine an alternate reality in which some essence called “I” was switched from Fred to Jack, but leaving the presupposition of a Fred-centered and a Jack-centered P-world intact, I found nothing I could transfer from one character to the other.

One might also object that some terms of art exist that overlap exactly with the P-world concept. The term “phenomenal consciousness” springs to mind, though there are others. But such terms are typically used as if they referred to something. I wish to introduce the P-world term precisely to keep any commitment to the reference of the term at bay. Thus, for some purposes, “phenomenal consciousness” might be a commitment of a particular descriptive or explanatory exercise. But many accounts of ourselves and our lives have differing P-world commitments, and my purpose here is to illustrate, in part, how the P-world shifts and changes as the domain and type of discourse changes.

Finally, it ought to be noted that in defining the P-world as all that is here, now, to a specific subject, there might seem to be an implied distinction between content (the cup as perceived) and subject (the perceiver of the cup). This apparent schism is forced upon me by language, but it is not intended. One idea to be explored herein is that no such distinction is tenable, and that once we describe some distal thing (a cup, a thought, a melody) as being perceived by or present to a subject, we have already extrapolated beyond experience, bringing knowledge, conceptual biases, interpretation, etc to bear. If we choose to define experience as that which is here and now for a subject, that does not commit us to dividing the experience into that which is experienced and the subject who is doing the experiencing.

## 2 The indisputable reality of the P-world

Here are just a few familiar phenomena that seem to make sense only if we tentatively assume that there exists a domain such as the P-world. We all know that the expression “This hurts you more than it hurts me” is usually untrue. There is a very important sense in which the pain of a slap belongs to the slappee and not to the slapper. The experience of the pain (or should we simply say, the pain?) thus must be considered personal, private, privileged, and part of the phenomenal world of the one slapped. So, if we allow privileged knowledge/experience of the pain to the slappee, we have demonstrated our commitment to some kind of P-world.

There is a lot of talk within modern philosophy of mind of “qualia”, which are typically described as unanalysed raw “feels”, such as the character of redness. Qualia are private, privileged, and thus

very much of the nature of the P-world, however one might choose to delineate things. The domain of qualia seems to me to be particularly poorly defined (most such talk seems to choose colour experience as its prototypical example), so I am of the opinion that there is not much point in trying to align the P-world concept, as defined above, with the set of qualia experienced by a subject. But any talk of qualia clearly has P-world commitments.

Although the P-world does not appear as a well-defined entity within contemporary psychology, the very idea of the psychological subject seems to depend upon the notional existence of some version of the P-world. Any reference to epistemological privilege, to unobservable “mental states”, or the like leans upon the presumption of such a domain. P-worlds seem obligatory to any account of an experiencing subject, and the whole of perceptual psychology could be seen as an exercise in fleshing out the P-world, identifying its topology and dimension, and causally linking that to an objective external world to which it stands in insolent opposition.

The difference between a philosophical zombie in the sense of Chalmers, and a person, would seem to be the presence of a P-world, and nothing else, as, by hypothesis, the zombie is observationally indistinguishable from a human subject, and one of the defining characteristics of the P-world is its private, unobservable-by-any-other, nature. William James presupposes a well-defined P-world in the way he grounds his doctrine of Radical Empiricism, admitting only those entities and relations that are “drawn from experience”. Of course the experiential domain has always been the starting point for the many varieties of empiricism, but there are undoubtedly as many, if not more, varieties of P-world commitments as there are flavours of empiricism.

The mere assertion of one or other form of the P-world, or the denial of any specific form, seem to be equally pointless exercises. If we insist that the P-world has one or other determinate form, we fix the seemingly immortal tug of war between empirical and rational/intellectual claims, and the territory becomes very familiar. Many philosophers, especially in the 20th century, seem to have charted ways out of this perennial cul-de-sac. Seeking to avoid the pitfalls of a strict differentiation between the empirical and conceptual domains is an important theme of 20th Century philosophy of mind in both analytical and continental schools. Despite this, the common-sensical commitments, the psychological commitments, and the philosophical commitments hinted at above all persist, leading to the uncomfortable situation where theory seems to have diverged from everyday experience. Who is willing to defend a claim in public that the pain of the slapped is *not* personal, private, privileged, and, well, painful?

The more important question, and one to which I will later turn, is how to do science under these circumstances. Scientists are not all philosophers, though all scientific practice makes manifest one set of philosophical commitments or other. It is safe to say that Cartesian substance dualism is not a tenable philosophical position. Despite this, the P-world commitments of much of psychology, psychiatry, and perhaps other sciences of human experience and activity, all seem to depend upon the apportionment of a hermetically closed, private domain of experience, indexed to the passage of time, to each and every human person. There are dances one can do to shore up a defence that this is not Cartesian substance dualism. But there is no mainstream discourse of the person that is free of such P-world commitments.

### 3 Staring at the P-world

Edmund Husserl introduced the idea that one might attend directly to the character and properties of the continuous unfolding of experience in time. Using the method of bracketing, which involves

the attempt to suspend one's intellectual beliefs and the natural tendency to interpret things as they feature in an unfolding third person narrative, the phenomenologist would perform an act of reduction, or attending to the fabric of experience. This somewhat mysterious process is to be carefully distinguished from the less disciplined and rather discredited notion of introspection. It assumes that there is experience to which one can attend, which is prior to the kind of cogitation and interpretation so characteristic of the natural attitude. It tacitly subscribes to the now deeply rooted psychological architecture which sees perception as arising from raw sensory data, and feeding into further higher-level processes of cognition, and it attempts, as it were, to take a snapshot of an intermediate level, before the intellect and associated biases kick in.

Interpretations of just what the phenomenological reduction is, and can achieve, abound. Some swear by it; others dismiss it as incoherent. If the P-world were a determinate entity, then the reduction would be more or less equivalent to a description of its content, and that content would be distinct from the subject to whom the content is manifest. The present approach therefore is compelled to dismiss the notion of the phenomenological reduction, and to do so on the grounds that it takes the P-world as a given.

As I understand it, this commitment to a determinate form of the P-world seems to be tied to early Husserl. The later Husserl developed a more sophisticated notion of the *Lebenswelt* that stems, in part, from attempts to avoid the logical snarls that threaten a simplistic account of a fixed P-world. The philosophical genre of phenomenology is not intrinsically committed to pinning the P-world down, and my understanding is that the subsequent milestone figures of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty do not embrace Husserl's notion of the reduction in a straightforward manner. But I am not sure, and the difficulty of the phenomenological literature stands as a testament to the difficulty of talking about, and describing, that which is, in some sense, the most obvious thing in the world.

The Pharisee will have more to say on all of this in the future.