

Parallel Thinking Part 29: The Enigma of Consciousness I

by Rabbi Dr Moshe Freedman, New West End United Synagogue



Dr. Seuss (d. 1991) once wrote, “Today you are You, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is Youer than You”. Yet for all its positivity, Seuss’ quip unwittingly alludes to a fundamental philosophical

and scientific mystery.

There are two distinct definitions of consciousness. The first describes the state of being aware of one’s surroundings. The second refers to the awareness of one’s own existence – the sense of self, the inner workings of the mind and the subjective experience of what it is like to be you; the “Youness”, as coined by Dr. Seuss. It is the person we identify with inside our body; the self who makes our decisions, which the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle called ‘the ghost in the machine’.

Scientists and philosophers have long debated whether this “self” really exists. The vast majority argue that the subjective experiences of self-awareness and the mind can be reduced to complex neural activity. The sense of there being an individual inside our bodies who makes our decisions is actually an elaborate illusion. In reality, we are nothing more than a brain.

However, the American philosopher Thomas Nagel argues that for any organism there must be an experience of what it is like to be that organism. The phenomenon of being that organism can only be experienced by the organism itself. I cannot experience what it is like to be you, and you cannot experience what it is like to be me.

In a 1974 paper published in *The Philosophical Review*, Nagel highlighted this idea by posing the question, ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ He writes, “In so far as I can imagine this (which

is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat.”

The alternative view is that the mind is real and made of something non-physical. In fact, even those scientists who are adamant that self-awareness is merely the result of clever neural processing, admit that no one can adequately explain how physical processes in the brain could give rise to these subjective experiences. Australian philosopher David Chalmers dubbed this “the hard problem of consciousness”.

Modern Jewish thinkers such as Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (d.1953) identified two different types of awareness; the *mabat hachitzoni*, the external awareness and the *mabat hap’nimi*, the inner awareness. The former relates to our five senses and our logical processing of the outside world. The latter refers to everything else that we know intrinsically, without the need for external verification or evidence. The primary example of this inner awareness is the awareness of our own existence.

The fact that scientists and philosophers find the concept of consciousness so difficult to grapple with is because it represents the bridge between the objective physical world and the inner, subjective world of the mind. The next article will develop this idea in relation to mankind’s spiritual experience.

