

[Simon Glendinning](#)

## Derrida and the problem of consciousness: what would they have said about our mind- body problem?

### Book section

**Original citation:**

Glendinning, Simon (2016) Derrida and the problem of consciousness: what would they have said about our mind-body problem? In: Leach, Stephen and Tartaglia, James, (eds.) Consciousness and the Great Philosopher. Taylor & Francis Group, Oxford, UK. ISBN 9781138934429

© 2016 [Routledge](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/66160/>

Available in LSE Research Online: April 2016

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's submitted version of the book section. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

## Derrida and the Problem of Consciousness

Simon Glendinning

### I

If the 'Hard Problem' of consciousness concerns 'how and why' experiences 'arise' from a physical basis then it is clear that this is not among the many questions touched on in the writings of Jacques Derrida. He does not ask this question, nor do the questions he does ask indicate that he is especially touched by it. So I can't explore or introduce what Derrida had to say about it. However, even if this Problem is not Derrida's this does not mean that there are not Problems in the vicinity that are his. These mostly concern the nature of 'experiences', and the 'subject' whose experiences they are. I will pursue some of the details of his thinking on these themes in order to pose a question or challenge to those who claim to find a Hard Problem. One possibility is that it only looks like there is a Hard Problem here because the ones who suffer it are breathing in what Derrida calls 'the ether of metaphysics', and cannot see that their utterances only have their life there. Another possibility is that the Problem survives even when it is exposed to Derrida's counter-traditional thinking in the vicinity. In that case Derrida's thinking might assist those who pose the Hard Problem in specifying it more clearly.

Even if Derrida did not respond to the Hard Problem some of the terms of its usual expression were taken up and discussed by him. In particular, and from very early in his career, he posed questions to traditional philosophy concerning its appeal to consciousness: 'But what is consciousness? What does "consciousness" mean?' (Derrida 1972: 16). I will look at how Derrida responds on behalf of the tradition in a moment, but it is worth noting first the pointers or gestures offered in the literature on the Hard Problem that relate to the sort of thing a reflection on consciousness should include in its embrace. On the one hand, we find examples of certain kinds of qualitative experiential contents: 'the quality of deep blue'; 'the sensation of middle C'. And, on the other hand, something like the general dimension of the qualitative itself: 'a subjective aspect' of thinking and perceiving; 'a rich inner life'; and the notorious idea that 'there is *something it is like* to be a conscious organism' (Chalmers 1995). The more general dimension adds a further specification: the experiential contents at issue are undergone by a 'subject of experience'. There is, then, some 'who' for whom these experiences are undergone *as* experiences. On the idea of such a 'subject' Derrida has very clear views, views which he takes to have been developed and elaborated before him by Heidegger. And here Derrida does not take for granted that the concepts deployed by those who pose the Hard Problem are philosophically innocent or unproblematic. The following passage, continuing Derrida's initial question about consciousness, fairly summarizes Derrida's orientation in this area:

But what is consciousness? What does 'consciousness' mean? Most often . . . consciousness offers itself to thought only as self-presence . . . And what holds for consciousness holds here for so-called subjective existence in general. Just as the category of the subject cannot, and never has been, thought without reference to presence as *hupokeimenon* or as *ousia*, etc., so the subject of consciousness has never manifested itself except as self-presence. The privilege granted to consciousness therefore signifies the privilege granted to the present . . . This privilege is the ether of metaphysics, the element of our thought that is caught in the

language of metaphysics. One can delimit such a closure today only by soliciting the value of presence that Heidegger has shown to be the onto-theological determination of Being. (op. cit. 1972: 16)

Proponents of the Hard Problem sometimes like to find its expression in the work of philosophers from the past. We have to be prepared to find this unpersuasive: that its appearance there only illustrates its rootedness in the onto-theological, metaphysical, tradition, and is not reliable testimony to a Problem. Since Heidegger, this tradition has itself become a theme for philosophical thinking, and its inadequacies (or claimed inadequacies) tracked down. As the quotation shows Derrida is a follower of Heidegger in this area, and his own contribution belongs to an inheritance of the Heideggerian understanding of the philosophical tradition.

The Heideggerian background here is his claim that the metaphysics of the subject, roughly the modern tradition of philosophy since Descartes, where consciousness is the point of departure, has simply taken over the mediaeval (Graeco-Christian or onto-theological) determination of the fundamental meaning of Being (what it means for something *to be*) as *presence*. Hence rather than establishing a new beginning for philosophy it simply implants an old 'baleful prejudice' into its foundations (Heidegger 1927a: 46). The meaning of our own Being – the '*sum*' of the '*res cogitans*' – is interpreted accordingly as self-presence, and the most basic structure of 'experience' of this self-present 'subject' is similarly interpreted as 'the simple awareness of something present-at-hand in its sheer presence-at-hand' (ibid.: 48). The deep blue or the middle C, they too are conceived in terms of presence; in terms of their presence to a self-present subject of experience. Heidegger summarizes:

The question of the "who" [that in each case I am] answers itself in terms of the 'I' itself, the 'subject', the 'Self'. . . Ontologically we understand it as something which is in each case already constantly present-at-hand both in and for a closed realm, and which lies at the basis, in a very special sense, as the *subjectum* . . . Even if one rejects the 'soul substance' and the Thinghood of consciousness, or denies that a person is an object, ontologically one is still positing something whose Being retains the meaning of present-at-hand whether it does so explicitly or not. (ibid.: 150)

This is how 'subjective existence' has been understood in modern philosophy, even when it has rejected the soul substance idea of Cartesianism. And it is this understanding that Derrida wants to shake up ('solicit'). His aim is to elaborate a counter-traditional approach to the meaning of our own Being – an ambition with respect to which he finds important precursors not only in Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein*, but also in Nietzsche and Freud. Central to this is his effort to bring us to see that 'presence' is not the basic meaning of our Being, and indeed that what we still tend to construe as basic to our Being ('the living present', for example) should be thought of 'as an "effect"' not a primary datum (Derrida 1972: 16). This is not to be read as a nod in the direction of a 'physical basis' from which experiences 'arise' out of some merely material causality. Rather, as I will try to show in what follows, it is a consequence of taking seriously the implications of our having an existence structure that is run through by *differences*, and in particular *the system of differences* that constitutes a language.

## II

I will take it as a significant fact about philosophers who suffer the Hard Problem that the perceptual reports they work with are invariably cases where someone fixates on something that is merely present-at-hand. The visual impression of 'deep blue' is not reported as an impressive and attention drawing appearance among *other* appearances ('Yesterday the sea was milky grey, but today it was a wonderfully deep blue'). The sound of 'middle C' is not recalled or attended to as a noteworthy moment in a movement of *different* notes ('Listen to that transition and how the emphasis falls on middle C'). The philosopher's attention to 'deep blue' appears more like someone simply staring at a paint sample than someone attempting to paint a picture (but it is even less involved in any practical interest than that attention has); and the attention to 'middle C' is more like someone tuning a piano than actually playing it (but, again, it is even less involved in any practical interest). It gives the impression of wanting to attend simply to 'the presence of something present' and no more. In order that this might be construed as doing anything of the sort, the contemplating philosopher draws on words and concepts to articulate what it is they are attending to: 'deep blue', 'middle C'. This not only abstracts from concrete situations in which (as we have just seen) our attention is being drawn to *differences*, but also from the actual system of language, itself *a system of differences*, from which these words and concepts are drawn. In doing so one might suspect that the philosopher's scene of perceptual fixation can only get going towards finding a Hard Problem by interpolating what Derrida calls a 'classical semiology' of the spoken or written sign into a meditation that is conceived as being free of problematic philosophical assumptions (ibid.: 9).

Within the 'ether of metaphysics', indeed as a fundamental expression of its hold on our thinking, the *linguistic sign* is construed as the name of a possible presence. The co-presence of the sign and the intuited (sensed) presence is a sort of fulfilling moment of a being-together of a word and the presence it names. In fact, that would be the moment in which the sign would become properly redundant: it would no longer be required as a sign, and could be replaced by '*this*', or indeed nothing at all: the presence itself is fully present. And the sign is thus understood as the means by which we can speak about a presence 'in its absence' (ibid.). Derrida describes this classic conception of the sign as follows:

The sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, 'thing' here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. We take or give signs. We signal.... What I am describing here in order to define it is the classically determined structure of the sign in all the banality of its characteristics... And this structure presupposes that the sign... is conceivable only on the *basis* of the... missing presence (ibid.).

The philosopher's appeal to recall the 'experience' of 'deep blue' or 'middle C' is made in words. But the one who poses the Hard Question could (for example in a lecture) do without the words, and just (as it were) point to the 'thing' itself in its actual presence. Look at *this*; Listen to *this*. One may wonder, as many philosophers do, whether this kind of discriminating attention is possible without a system of language, indeed of language as a *system of differentiation*. Look at *what?* (The shape?) Listen to *what?* (The timbre?) It matters whether the one who asks the Hard Question thinks it

makes sense to speak of a subject that is not a *speaking* subject. And philosophers are the least likely to find no significance whatsoever in an understanding of ourselves as the entity which talks. Indeed, among the Greeks this qualifier ('speaking') was not conceived as one capacity among others for the living thing that we are: they defined us in our essence as the '*zoon logon echon*'; the living thing with the capacity for talking. As Heidegger stresses, 'this does not signify that the possibility of vocal utterance is peculiar to him' (1927a: 208). On the contrary, language will be thought of as fundamentally two-sided: involving, on the one hand, a dimension that can be taken in by our *sensibility* ('words', written or spoken), and, on the other hand, a dimension that can be grasped only by our *understanding* ('meaning'). The Greek conception of the speaking animal was of an entity that is not given over to a swirl or attack of sensations but being such 'as to discover the world and *Dasein* itself' (ibid.: 209). The capacity for grasping the *logos* is the mark of an animal for whom the world not only sensorily affects it but intelligibly makes sense to it. We can *see* the distinctive 'deep blue' of the sea, and can *hear* the distinctive pitch of 'middle C'.

For the moment then let us continue with the assumption that the so-called 'subject of experience' is a 'speaking subject'. That may in no way disturb the thinker of the Hard Problem (who no doubt knows all about the 'myth of the given'), but perhaps that is because the onto-theological tradition of understanding Being as presence *also* provides for an interpretation of ourselves as speaking creatures. With respect to our speaking, the philosopher who poses the Hard Problem can construe language (as a system of world-differentiation) in the terms of the classical semiology; that is, in terms of language as a system of *terms*, of 'positive terms', with which and through which we can speak about the world and ourselves (Derrida 1972: 11). Someone who understands the language in question can deploy that in the fixation scenario in order to discriminate the perceptual content we are being invited to attend to.

Derrida's first major theoretical step in shaking up the metaphysical ether surrounding our thinking is to argue (following Saussure) that language, our concept language, is *not* a set of positive terms 'between which differences are set up' but rather that 'every concept is inscribed in a chain or system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of a systematic play of differences' (ibid.). Derrida famously dubs 'such a play of differences' 'an "*originary*" *différance*' (with an 'a') that is the very possibility of conceptuality (ibid.).

### III

To help understand Derrida's metaphysical ether-solicitation I will first provide a formalised version of why he thinks we are obliged to go *beyond* traditional philosophical resources for thinking about the discrimination of the identity of signs; namely, in terms of one or other of two distinctively human receptive faculties, faculties corresponding to the two sides of the sign as classically understood: *sensibility* and *understanding*. Our interest in his argument is that it poses a head-on challenge to the classical semiology and the privilege it accords to consciousness construed in terms of presence. The first steps are as follows.

1. Assume that what belongs to sensibility are always perceptions of some present sensory data. (For example, assume that what can be heard is always a sound or is composed of sounds or properties of sounds)

2. Articulate, meaningful speech is, by definition, something which can be heard.
3. For articulate, meaningful speech to be possible, a language must contain a number of discriminably different units (call them 'phonemes'). People must be able to discriminate different phonemes if speech is to function as such.
4. The *difference* between two phonemes is not itself a sound – not some third sound, not an audible 'something'.
5. Therefore the difference which establishes speech and lets it be heard is inaudible (in every sensory sense of the word).
6. But since meaningful speech is possible the difference between two phonemes must still be discriminable.
7. Therefore one ought to reject the idea that such discrimination belongs to sensibility.

What is discriminated when one hears an identifiable phoneme *cannot* be reduced to a sound which is simply present in the present. And hence we need to reject the first premise of the argument: *what is heard* is not reducible to sounds or properties of sounds, something fully present in the present. At this point Derrida affirms something of the *differential* conception of signs proposed by structuralist linguistics, according to which identity can only determine or delimit itself through differential relations to other such elements.

The steps we have just run through capture the part of Derrida's discussion in his essay '*Différance*' that relates to a rejection of the assumption that an adequate account of the discrimination of phonemes might belong to sensibility (i.e. can be understood in terms of what is simply given as 'present' to the senses). He then invites the repetition of the same argument for writing. Graphic differences 'can never be sensed as a full term' either. In short, in neither case can we maintain the view that the discrimination of differences which makes possible the apprehension of linguistic signs 'belongs to sensibility' (ibid.: 5).

In the very next sentence Derrida goes on to claim that it cannot belong to an order of intelligibility either (i.e. cannot be understood as something discriminated by the understanding, as that is construed by philosophy). We cannot conclude that what is at issue here is something that is present to, and that is 'seen' or 'heard' by, the mind's eye / ear.

This step in Derrida's argument draws in part from a wider recognition that human understanding has been interpreted, from Greek times, in terms derived from sensibility, or perhaps better, it draws on the fact that from Greek times sensibility and understanding (perception and conception) have been *the* terms through which the principal faculties of human cognition have interpreted, and *both* are interpreted in terms of the apprehension of something present – in terms that is of the same logic of 'presence'. It is this logic that, Derrida is arguing here, the differential structure of signs resists or escapes. And so we can now add to (7) the following parallel conclusion:

8. Therefore one ought to reject the idea that such discrimination belongs to intelligibility.

At which point we reach a devastating final dialectical blow:

9. We must let ourselves refer to an order that resists one of the founding oppositions of philosophy.

This order 'is announced', Derrida says, 'in a movement of *différance*... which belongs neither to the voice nor to writing in the usual sense' (ibid.).

As I have indicated, part of the counter-traditional conception that Derrida wants to outline is a structuralist thesis: when it comes to discriminated identities, what makes something what it is and not another thing (a 'deep blue', a 'middle C') is not to be construed as an independently discriminable presence (which sets up discoverable differences to other such things). Rather, the delimited 'what' of 'what we perceive' emerges only for an existence inscribed within a language system – and that means what we 'see' and 'hear' are 'effects' of a system of language 'in which there are *only* differences *without positive terms*' (Saussure, cited in ibid.: 11). Seeing that the sea is 'deep blue' presupposes a language system of colour *differences* which are drawn on implicitly or explicitly in the language events in which it is inscribed ('Yesterday it was milky grey'). Hearing that the note was 'middle C' similarly presupposes a language system of pitch *differences*. 'There is', Derrida concludes, 'no presence before and outside semiological difference' (ibid.: 12), and *a fortiori* no bare sensory presence to fixate on or attend to, as the thinker of the Hard Problem seems to imagine.

Derrida goes along with the structuralist thesis, but he does not leave it at that. The structuralist construal is generally *static*, and fails sufficiently to acknowledge that systems of differences do not fall from the sky ready-made or fully-formed but themselves come to be. Derrida asks whether the movement that brings such a system into being is something that can itself appear 'on the stage of presence' as such. One possibility here would be to present or represent this movement as, simply, *the process of differentiation*. The problem is, however, that this implies a development in which some kind of substantial something or other *gets differentiated*. But the only 'prior' presence in this case is itself a system of differentiation – there is no simple origin of differentiation, but only a going back to pre-linguistic differential patterns and markings that are something purely animal, not, in any case, the work of an originating 'subject' that would produce them.

What Derrida calls '*différance*' (with an 'a') can be understood as the 'difference producing' movement through which every sign is constituted historically in a structuring and differentiating weave of differences. Within this new Derridean (French-ish) manner of speaking we can say that it is because there is, in the case of elements of signification, no identity without *différance* (with an 'a') that we can affirm that an ordinary *différence* (with an 'e') is always a *différence* (with an 'e') between elements whose own identity is always already marked by *différance* (with an 'a'). Without wishing to encourage the reader to indulge in an embarrassing French (spoken) accent, it is important to note that when you read the previous sentences you should not pronounce *différence* differently to *différance*. Not at all. Don't try to stretch out the 'a' in some kind of absurd pastiche of Français, for example. The two words are *intended* to be 'to the ear' perfectly indistinguishable, totally indiscriminable. So *say* them the same. The *difference* between them is, that is, exclusively 'graphic'. Of course, the discriminable difference between two graphemes is no more (or, in the end, no less) visual than the discriminable difference between two phonemes is aural. As we have seen, graphic differences 'can never be sensed as a full term' any more than phonetic ones. Nevertheless, Derrida wants to put *strategic* emphasis on graphematic differences, the better to disrupt the

classical semiological privilege of the presence of the phonetic signifier: the 'rich inner life' will have always been imagined as an acoustic self-presence, not – and here we might be touching on a Real Enigma – the welling up of speech (or any other mode of signifying) from the depths of silence. But let's return to the metaphysics of presence.

#### IV

The basic effort in Derrida's discussion is an attempt to shift us away from thinking that – whether we are thinking about the discrimination or recognition of a word or the meaning of a word – we are concerned with something that might ever be simply or fully present 'in and of itself'. Remember, we are in the zone of a critique of a quite specific metaphysics of identity here, and there is no question of denying that elements of signification have some kind of discriminable identity. What is being denied is that this can be construed in terms of the discrimination (by the ear or eye or by the mind's ear or eye) of a persisting presence that might be present to a self-present subject.

For Derrida, by contrast, to *be* a 'speaking subject' is to exist (already) in a relation with the system of linguistic differences, call it *existence as inscribed inhabitation*. As Derrida puts it 'the subject becomes a *signifying* (signifying in general, by means of speech or any other sign) subject only by inscribing itself in the system of differences' (ibid.: 16). But with that 'commerce' belonging internally to the very structure of every 'my existence' (part of the structure of the *Dasein* that is in each case mine) the structure of all perceptual 'givenness' will be riven, run through, by a discrimination system whose *basic* principle is 'no longer that of presence but of *différance*' (ibid.).

However, the one who asks the Hard Question may well want to say at this point that while this system may assist a viewing subject or a listening subject to attend to what is being meant, nevertheless *what is identified* (the 'deep blue', the 'middle C') can only be identified or recognized by a 'consciousness' that is actually *present*. And surely, they might say, we are witnesses to our own conscious presence. But – is there really any more sense to the idea of 'attending to one's consciousness' than 'attending to the colour of an object' or 'attending to the sound of a musical note' in the philosopher's scene of perceptual? In fact, isn't there *less*? If the one who poses the Hard Problem just stares blankly around them and says they are 'attending to their consciousness' and are wondering how *this* arises from a physical basis we might now be on the verge of seeing that the whole thing, the whole Hard Problem, presupposes the metaphysics of presence and its classical semiology. Of course, one can attend to and report on states of one's consciousness – one's different moods and sensations, for example – but what we mean by 'consciousness' is not any less a function of a system of differences than any other word. And one doesn't discriminate *anything at all* by staring around one and saying 'this'.

The worry I have been developing here with regard to the philosopher's scene of perceptual fixation has a familiar Heideggerian lineage (staring at the hammer-Thing, for example). But it dovetails too with many of the later Wittgenstein's discussions of philosophical problems, discussions that would not, I think, be uncongenial to Derrida. And the Derridean disruption of the classical semiology we have been following does seem to open onto a suspicion that the very attempt to frame the Hard Problem might draw on the 'ether' of the metaphysics of presence in a way that leads the analysis of our existence, as Heidegger puts it, 'into a pitfall' (1927a: 151). We seem to be invited to ask by the



proponent of the Hard Problem: 'How can *this*' (where, in saying 'this', we supposedly attend to something simply *present*) 'arise from a physical basis?' Wittgenstein finds something extremely fishy in such a question, and he connects it closely to the scene of perceptual fixation that belongs to the myth of presence:

The feeling of an unbridgeable gulf between consciousness and brain-process: how does it come about that this does not come into the considerations of our ordinary life? This idea of a difference in kind is accompanied by slight giddiness, – which occurs when we are performing a piece of logical sleight-of-hand... When does this feeling occur in the present case? It is when I, for example, turn my attention in a particular way on to my own consciousness, and, astonished, say to myself: THIS is supposed to be produced by a process in the brain! – as it were clutching my forehead –. – But what can it mean to speak of 'turning my attention on to my own consciousness'? This is surely the queerest thing there could be! It was a particular act of gazing that I called doing this. I stared fixedly in front of me – but not at any particular point or object. My eyes were wide open, the brows not contracted (as they mostly are when I am interested in a particular object). No such interest preceded this gazing. My glance was vacant; or again like that of someone admiring the illumination of the sky and drinking in the light. Now bear in mind that the proposition which I uttered as a paradox (THIS is produced by a brain-process!) has nothing paradoxical about it. I could have said it in the course of an experiment whose purpose was to shew that an effect of light which I see is produced by stimulation of a particular part of the brain. – But I did not utter the sentence in the surroundings in which it would have had an everyday and unparadoxical sense. And my attention was not such as would have accorded with making an experiment. (If it had been, my look would have been intent, not vacant.) (Wittgenstein 1953: §412)

How should we imagine Wittgenstein's 'experiment'? It concerns 'an effect of light which I see'. I want to suggest that Wittgenstein is imagining a situation in which he is having a (perhaps disturbing or disconcerting) visual disturbance, and that he goes in to the experiment already knowing (and perhaps worrying about) something being wrong. He might have reported it to his doctor, for example. What might such an 'effect of light which I see' be? A common 'effect of light' that one might see is *shadow*, another is *strobing*. Let's say that Wittgenstein was (perhaps occasionally, and certainly in the absence of strobe lights) experiencing strobing. The neurological experiment might establish that this experience comes on every time a particular part of his brain is stimulated. So Wittgenstein then comes to know what's up, and can henceforth exclaim with some confidence, when this effect of light which he sees is happening, 'This [strobing] is produced by a brain process.'

Now compare that proposition with this one: 'This [deep blue] is produced by grinding lapis lazuli into a powder and mixing it with oil and resin.' In both cases, the possibility of discriminating attention to something that can be seen, presupposes inscribed inhabitation in a linguistic system of differences. In the first case, a language of light and light effect differences and, in the second, a language of colour differences. And in both cases, conceptually delimited phenomena – features of 'the world and *Dasein* itself' – that are perceptually accessible are explained in terms of their 'how and why'. There is, no doubt, a *lot* more that can be said about the 'hows and whys' here (the chemistry of ultramarine is serious chemistry), but in neither case are we engaged in a build-up of

information that might (we hope) 'finally' get rid of the Hard Problem – because the Hard Problem was never there.

The Hard Question I would want to put to those who think they are posing a genuine problem with the Hard Problem is whether the propositions that they want to utter to express it must be 'uttered as a paradox'? If so, then Derrida's claim might be that it depends for its compelling character on the ether of the metaphysics of presence. Alternatively, if those who pose the Hard Problem can show that it can be motivated without recourse to the metaphysics of presence, and that one can find it in propositions which have 'an everyday and unparadoxical sense' like Wittgenstein's post-experimental utterance concerning an effect of light he can see, then they may be onto something. But, presently, I just can't see it.

Word Count: 4996