

## «Je crois en moi»

*So, you must be feeling pretty good about yourself, because you got a B+ on your last paper, eh?*

- Umm... Not really.

*Well, Mr. Smartie-Pants, I have a doozy for you now...*

- ...You mean the question “Who or what am I”?

*How did you know?!?!*

- I read the assignment sheet.

*Very funny, hotshot. Let's see what you've got.*

- Previously, I discussed how perception, culture, and what I termed my “consciousness” all work in concert for me to conceptualize the existence of that helpful assignment sheet. Thus, it must follow that these dimensions must also apply to how I conceptualize myself. In particular, this is a chance for me to delve into my consciousness, and determine exactly what it is that I'm talking about. I believe that “I” exist as a physical entity – and I shall support this belief by examining my senses and culture, and consciousness.

To state that I have any sort of “presence” contains an intrinsic bias – it implies something for me to be present *in*. But this particular bias works for me, because it lends credence to the accepted notion of a physical world. This world in place, I may examine how my senses affect my perception. The argument that I presented when considering the existence of “*the paper*” proves its usefulness here. In examining this physical object, I determined that my perception of it was bound not only by my senses, but also by the way that I have been *taught* to manipulate my senses. Having been exposed to paper all

of my life, it is easier for me to discern paper in the environment than it is for someone who has never seen paper before. Therefore, my five senses, each in their own way, work in concert to perceive objects, grounding them in an external world. Socialization, on the other hand, is a continual learning process, that began when I was born and that will end when I die. This process has had a completely pervasive effect on my sense – changing the methodology by which I perceive, interact, or even reason about *my* environment. The methodology by which I form first impressions has been heavily influenced by my society – I attribute a negative connotation to objects that are darker in color, and give a positive connotation to objects that are lighter in color. Thus, to an alarming degree, what I am is what my culture has taught me to be.

In order to understand how socialization has affected my self-perception, I must start by examining some physical properties of myself. By a blind stroke of chance, I have been born male, in the United States. This biological circumstance, when recognized by others, has built a strong sense of *gender* within me. As such, I have certain engendered expectations that I must live up to, in order to be a “man”. But what is it to be a “man”? Cole explains, that in part “Men are rational agents, makers of order and measure, controllers of history...” (Cole, 481). Yet I find that my gender instills me with further responsibilities, ranging from those to family, to how I am to act when on a date. So, when I look at myself in the mirror, I pick out features that are valued in my society. I consider if I look attractive (based upon gender and culture-specific notions of attractiveness), if I speak intelligently, or even if I seem friendly enough. All of these properties are rooted in my culture, and they participate strongly in my self-perception. Thus, for all that I know, I am simply what I have been taught to be.

Yet, I have some notion of *consciousness*, which may free me from the bonds of being a mere sociological construction. By coming to some understanding about what my consciousness is, and how it is integrated with myself, may lead me to make some statement about what I am. In my vernacular, I find myself using the term “*consciousness*” in a romantic sense. It’s fun to bat around the word consciousness, without really thinking about exactly *what* I’m talking about. In order to come to some understanding, I find the argument presented by Daniel Dennett to be helpful. He argues that consciousness is simply a complex set of instructions, carried out by the organic computer that is the brain. Being a student of computer science, my first reaction was to agree completely with this idea. But further thinking revealed that I was merely accepting his ideals on *faith*, because belief in Dennett is the equivalent of believing in God, if I have the same amount of proof to back-up each theory. Thinking critically, when he says, “complexity does matter” (Dennett, 505), it is hard for me to see correctness of this statement, because it doesn’t actually *prove* anything. Dennett believes in some sort of *magic threshold* at which point a merely complex system of components becomes a thinking thing. I recognize the possibility, however, that humanity may never create a machine that achieves this threshold.

Although I have labored to come to some understanding about my consciousness, it still remains mysterious. Pushing further, Descartes understood that he had a brain, but he could not comprehend how a mere bodily organ was able to support all of the mental faculties that he regularly experienced. Thus, the only logical explanation to which he could arrive was that there was a “*mind*”, which was immaterial, and existed separately from the body. However, it seems to me that as the breadth of human knowledge

increases, we learn more about the brain, and mental faculties that were once associated with the mind have now become associated with the brain. Thus, the label “mind” is used for any idea about ourselves that we cannot explain through our knowledge of the brain. This leads me to believe that I may be using *consciousness* in much the same way that Descartes uses the *mind* – as a wrapper for all of the parts of myself that I do not understand.

Generally, I tend to be predisposed to ideas generated by science than those generated by some 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher. Thus, my sense of understanding is grounded in modern science. Furthermore, traits that fall outside of my understanding are those that science cannot make clear for me. For example, I frequently have problems with anxiety – where I am in a constant state of fear, both mentally and physically. For the most part, this fear is irrational, and at a conscious level, I can perceive this to be so. Yet, even if I “tell myself” that these fears are irrational and unfounded, my anxiety will still remain. I am at a loss to explain this defect in myself using science alone.

*Well Mr. Reitz, it seems that we've come to the end of another glorious soliloquy, and again, you **still** haven't proven anything. In fact, questions that I raised after your first diatribe are still unresolved. Just what **is** your consciousness, anyway?*

- My consciousness gives me the capacity to subjectively evaluate not only my *mind*, but also my *self*. It is my consciousness that allows me to go beyond myself, and connect with others. It is my consciousness that allows me to consider other perspectives and views. Ultimately, it is my consciousness that allows me to answer your question. And although I may be unclear as to the state of its existence, I am sure that the properties that I have attributed to it do exist – they define *me*.