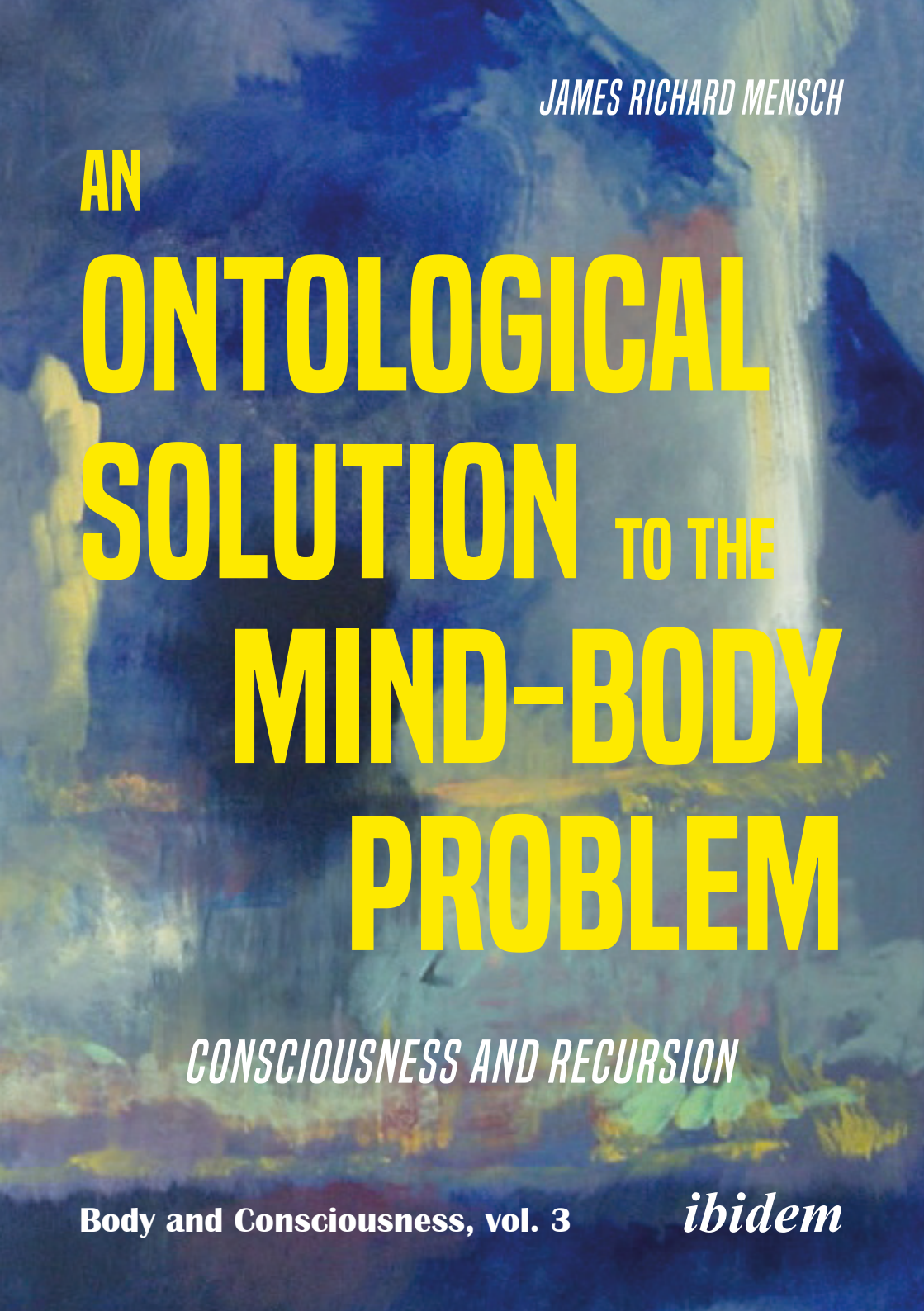
JAMES RICHARD MENSCH
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CONSCIOUSNESS AND RECURSION
Body and Consciousness, vol. 3
ibidem

James Richard Mensch

An Ontological Solution to the Mind-Body Problem

Consciousness and Recursion

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This book is dedicated to my children, who have enriched my life throughout these many years

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Table of Contents

Introduction

§1. The Statement of the Problem

One of the most remarkable passages in Victor Klemperer's memoire of living as a Jew in Nazi Germany concerns a pencil and paper that a guard gives him half-way through his week of imprisonment. Sentenced for violating the blackout regulations, he is plunged into despair. He feels surrounded by nothingness: "the nothingness around me because I am cut off from everything, the nothingness inside me because I think nothing, I feel nothing but emptiness."[1] Receiving the pencil and paper, he recounts, "At that moment my life was just as much transformed as when the prison door slammed shut. Everything was lighter again, indeed had become almost light."[2] As he also relates: "On my pencil I climb back to earth out of the hell of the last four days."[3] The action of writing saved him "from the obsessive search for thoughts." Writing, he "felt this relief again and again."[4] How are we to understand this remarkable effect of seeing his thoughts expressed in writing, i.e., having them present such that he can return to them, correct them and add to them? Anyone who has written an extended letter, article, or book knows how essential it is to preserve one's thoughts on paper or a computer screen. The experience is one of the silent processes of thought becoming present in a form that can be repeatedly made conscious. Moreover, reading what one has written affects the unconscious process and stimulates it to come forward with new thoughts, which, as conscious, affect in turn the unconscious process, provoking further thoughts.

This view runs counter to the view held by many cognitive scientists, who either deny our possessing cognitive repre-

1 Victor Klemperer, I Will Bear Witness, A Diary of the Nazi Years 1933-1941, trans. Martin Chalmers (New York: Random House, 1998), p. 409.
2 Ibid., p. 412.
3 Ibid., p. 413.
4 Ibid., p. 414.

sentations or dismiss them as epiphenomenal.[5] For Frank Jackson, for example, such representations have as much causal reality as a rainbow: "They do nothing, they explain nothing." They are simply "a useless by-product" of our evolutionary development.[6] His very experience of writing his famous article, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," undermines this view. Such an experience involves a constant shifting back and forth from the anonymous brain processes that result in thought and the conscious presence of such thought. Without the latter, particularly in thought's presence as written down, no extended process of thinking would be possible.[7] What does this need for conscious presence tell us about the mind's relation to the brain? Can our current understanding account for it?

David Chalmers expresses the contemporary consensus of cognitive scientists when he writes that "the really hard problem of consciousness is the problem of 'experience.'" It is the problem of the "subjective aspect" of our perceptions, for example, "the felt quality of redness, the experience of dark and light, the quality of depth in a visual field."[8] This "felt quality" refers to contents in their qualitative presence, contents that cognitive scientists term "qualia." As felt, qualia are not just contents, but contents that we are aware of perceiving. The distinction is that, for example, between a camera's registering of light and its perception by us. Unlike the camera, we are aware of receiving the light. Such self-awareness distinguishes the conscious apprehension, say, of redness from redness as an objective quality, i.e., as something independent of consciousness. We not only bring this color to consciousness, but are aware of our seeing it. As a result, the quality is not just present, but

5 A notable exception is, of course, David Chalmers. His "Consciousness and its Place in Nature" is "an extended argument against reductive views of consciousness" (*The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Mind,* eds, S. Stich & F., Warfield, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, p. 103.

6 Frank Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," *Philosophical Quarterly* 32: 135, 134.

7 This is true for the modern age that relies on writing. In mnemonic cultures such as those of ancient Greece, the permanent conscious representation was held in memory.

8 David Chalmers, "Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies,* 2(3):200-19, 1995, p. 3.

felt to be so. The question is: how is this possible? What are the processes involved in this?

§2. The Difficulty of the Problem

Since the birth of modern science, this problem has appeared insolvable. The premise of this book is that this is because of the ontological framework assumed by science. Its conceptions of space, time, and the reality that they position are such that it becomes impossible to relate mind or consciousness to the physical processes of our embodiment.[9] To understand these conceptions, we can turn to Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason*, is informed by Newton's ideas. Kant notes that when we engage in external perception, what we regard is always now. Looking with our eyes or hearing with our ears, we register only what is presently occurring. Thus, I cannot visually see the past. Neither can I see the future. If I could, I would read tomorrow's stock report and choose my stocks accordingly. What this signifies is that external perception, at any given moment, only gives us the static relations involved in the spatial configurations at that moment. To grasp temporal relations, I must turn inward. I have to regard my memories and anticipations. Through these, I grasp temporal durations. Turning inward, however, I suffer a blindness parallel to that of external perception. While the latter cannot visually see time, internal perception cannot grasp space—i.e., actual spatial extensions.[10] Thus, I cannot say how many centimeters wide a perception of an object is. Neither can I say that one memory is to the right or left of another memory.

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9 The general question here is: how far does this framework account for reality? As Thomas Nagel writes: it is important both for science itself and for philosophy to ask how much of what there is the physical sciences can render intelligible—how much of the world's intelligibility consists in its subsumability under universal, mathematically formulable laws governing the spatial-temporal order" (Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos, Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 18).

10 See Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 2nd ed., B37, *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königliche Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 23 vols. (Berlin: George Reiner, 1955), 3:52. Unless otherwise noted, all translations into English are my own.

The same holds for my anticipations. Spatial terms, thus, do not apply to the consciousness that consists of my perceptions, memories, and anticipations. This is the insight behind Descartes' calling mind unextended. Extension simply does not apply to the conscious contents that fill it.[11]

So conceived, this distinction between internal and external perception has two results. The first is that space and time are definitionally distinct—that is to say, each can be defined independently of the other. The second is that the same holds for consciousness and the external world: The spatial world grasped through external perception does not include consciousness; it can be defined as it is in itself, independently of it. Such independence is, in fact, a mark of its objectivity as grasped by science. Similarly, consciousness is definitionally distinct from the world. Its present, momentary reality as consciousness includes anticipations and memories and, with this, temporal extensions. Such temporal relations, however, are not present in the world. The world's present, momentary reality is innocent of extended time. Given this, consciousness and the world are radically distinct realities. The temporal relations that characterize the one are independent of the spatial relations that mark the other. They cannot be related since there is no conceivable explanatory bridge that would link the two domains.

This separation of space and time will seem improbable to the reader After all, the external world that we grasp is filled with movement. But movement involves time. How, then, can we assert that time is drained from the world when we refer to time in our accounts of the moving world? This objection has all the validity of common sense. But it is one that modern science rigorously ignores. Proceeding through external perception, it registers the results of its experiments. It then expresses the relations it uncovers by mathematical formulae. It discovers, for example, that in a vacuum an object near the surface of the earth has an acceleration of 9.80665 m/s^2, where *m* is meters and *s* is seconds. This means that every

11 See *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. L. LaFleur (New York: Macmillan, 1990), p. 74.

second an object is in free fall, gravity will cause the velocity of the object to increase 9.80665 m/s. So, after one second, the object is traveling at 9.80665 m/s, after two, it is traveling twice this amount, and so on. To calculate the velocity of an object in free fall, I simply need to measure the time and apply this formula. Haven't I thus grasped time in my account of the external world? Not exactly. Every application of this formula takes, as it were, a snapshot of the world. It tells us how it appears at the temporal instant we have chosen. What we get are a bunch of static pictures, thus replicating our external perception at distinct instants. We do not, however, get the reality of either time or motion in their ongoing character. What about expressing the acceleration of the object in free fall through a graph of an upward curving line, where one axis measures time and the other distance traveled? This spatial figure is, however, frozen in time as are the empirical observations on which it is based. What we confront here is the spatialization of time. Recording the free fall of a body, we get a series of simultaneities—namely those linking the spatial positions of the hands of our clock and the corresponding spatial positions of the object. When we draw a graph of our results, we represent them through a spatial figure. The result of this procedure is, thus, to drain time from space. The very act of doing so, however, eliminates consciousness from the world. The world we grasp through this procedure is objective in the sense of being independent of consciousness. But it is also exclusionary. Ontologically, i.e., as a set of temporal relations, consciousness is excluded from the physical processes that science accounts for in its timeless mathematical formulae. Needless to say, in this view, there is no mind-body problem. We have no need to search for a bridge that would explain subjective phenomena in terms of material reality. Such phenomena would, rather, lack all status. A bridge to them would be a bridge to nowhere. It would not connect us to anything.[12]

12 This exclusion of time from the mathematical account of the physical world is an indication of the caution needed when employing the concepts of physics to the mind-body problem. As Thomas Nagel writes, "Certainly the mind-body problem is difficult enough that we should be suspicious of attempts to solve it with the concepts and methods developed to account for very different kinds of

§3. Patočka's insight

If, however, we wish to acknowledge the existence of both consciousness and the physical reality of the world, we have to affirm that consciousness and the material world are *not* definitionally distinct. This implies admitting that consciousness entails its embodiment. Just as words cannot be defined without syllables and syllables without the letters composing them, we cannot define consciousness without including its material basis. On an ontological level, the same holds for our view of space and time. Rather than being definitionally distinct, each must entail the other. Their relation can be expressed in terms of Merleau-Ponty's definition of our "perceptual faith." As Merleau-Ponty notes, we believe that our gaze terminates in external objects. We take for granted that, as embodied, we are included in the world that our gaze presents us with. Doing so, we take ourselves as one of its spatially extended objects. Equally, however, we take this visual world to be within us. We close our eyes and it disappears; we open them and it is again present. The spatial world, we assume, lies included in the temporal world of our consciousness. Accepting both views, we assert "I am in the world and the world is in me."[13] Implicitly, we assume the intertwining of space and time and, coordinated with this, the intertwining of our consciousness and its embodiment. In both cases, rather than being definitionally distinct, each entails the other.

In applying these conclusions to the mind-body problem, we shall avail ourselves of the insights of the Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka. He writes:

> space and time, considered as distinct dimensions of "movement" and of "modification," which alone are originally given (that is, space and time, considered as dimensions of the "change" that provides their basis)—are only a development, each time different, of the "possibility" of movement or modification. They do not become factual space or time except through an actual movement or a modification of what is the case.[14]

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things [i.e., inanimate objects]. Instead, we should expect theoretical progress in this area to require a major conceptual revolution" (Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, p. 42).

13 Ibid., p. 8.

14 Patočka, "Phénoménologie et ontologie du mouvement," *Papiers Phénoménologiques*, trans. Erika Abrams (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1995), p. 38.

Implicit, here, are a number of assertions. The first is that space and time are not originally given. Motion is what is primary. Space and time, rather than being independent realities, are actually dimensions of motion. It is what provides their basis. It is also what actualizes them, i.e., makes them "factual" space and time. This actualization, as we shall see, occurs through placing each in the other. As a preliminary exposition, we may note that we distinguish time in terms of its "before" and "after" through motion, saying, for example, that "before" a moving body (say the hand of a clock) was *in* this spatial position and "afterwards" it was *in* this different spatial position. Motion places time in space by placing its moments *in* distinct spatial positions. Similarly, motion places space in time, since a moving body traverses space *in* a definite time. Such mutual placing signifies that we are dealing here not with two separate realities, but rather with a single fundamental reality. It points to the fact that space and time are abstractions drawn from a primary reality, which is that of motion.

This intertwining of space and time mirrors, according to Patočka, the interdependence of the world and consciousness. Both are dimensions of motion; both are actualized through it. Patočka expresses this point when he writes that his goal "is a philosophy of a distinct kind, one which takes movement as its basic concept and principle … What is distinctive about our attempt is our interpretation of movement; we understand it independently of the dichotomy between subject and object," i.e., between "on the one hand, an objective world, complete, self-enclosed, and, on the other hand, a subject perceiving this world."[15] Prior to both is motion. It is what actualizes and links the two. There is, here, a double claim. The first is that the priority of motion to space and time is also its priority to the objective spatial world and the temporal, subjective perceiving of this world. The second is that just as motion actualizes space and time (making them "factual") so it actualizes both the world and its appearing. In Patočka's words, movement is what "first makes this or that being *apparent*, causes it to manifest itself in

15 *Body, Community, Language, World*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1998), p. 153.

its own original manner."[16] It is also "what makes a being what it is. Movement unifies, maintains cohesion, synthesizes the being's determinations. The persistence and succession of the determinations of a substrate, etc., are movements."[17] Movement, in the latter assertion, is understood as including "ontological" motion. It is not just the movement of *already existent* entities. It also includes that motion that *actualizes* entities. This actualization embraces, as entities, both what appears and the sentient organisms receptive to its appearing. It is by virtue of the motion that makes an object be what it is that the object can be present in the sense of affecting, through such movement, its environment. It is also by virtue of the motion that makes an entity sentient—constitutes its functioning organs of sense—that this affection becomes the appearing of this object. Patočka's claim is, thus, that "movement is the foundation of every manifestation." It is "what founds the identity between being and appearing. Being is being manifest."[18] Being is being manifest insofar as motion has a twofold effect. It makes actual the space and time that form the framework for appearing. It also brings about the actualization of both what appears and the sentient beings to whom this appears.

§4. The Aim of this Book

The passages we have cited come from a number of scattered sources, including the unpublished manuscripts that Patočka left behind. He, himself, never argued for their claims in an organized fashion. Involved at the end of his life in the Czech Charter 77 movement affirming human rights, he died of a massive brain hemorrhage. Having been questioned repeatedly over the preceding two months, he succumbed shortly after an eleven-hour interrogation on March 13, 1977.[19] His work on motion, which occupied him

16 "Nachwort," in *Die natürliche Welt als philosophisches Problem, Phänomenologische Schriften I*, ed. Klaus Nellen and Jiří Němec, trans. Eliška and Ralph Melville (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1990), p. 242.

17 "Phénoménologie et ontologie du mouvement," p. 31.

18 Ibid.

19 See Erazim Kohák, *Jan Patočka, Philosophy and Selective Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 3.

in the last decade of his life, thus remains in fragments. In a certain sense, the aim of this book is to provide the ontological framework hinted at but never developed by Patočka. In doing so, we shall explore the phenomena that exhibit the embodiment of consciousness—the phenomena that demonstrate that, definitionally, consciousness entails embodiment. The same holds with regard to the phenomena underlying the interdependence of space and time.

This does not mean that the present work should be taken as a scholarly commentary on Patočka or, for that matter, on the other philosophers brought in to support its arguments. Its aim, rather, is to present a distinct approach to the mind-body problem, one whose validity should be judged by the soundness of its arguments and the evidence presented to support them. In considering this evidence, readers will have to abandon their prejudices—i.e., their ways of conceiving space, time, mind and the world, which for the most part have been informed by the framework of modern science. If our analysis is correct, it is precisely this framework that informs the mind-body problem, *making it insoluble.*

Beyond providing the framework for Patočka's insights, we also intend to go beyond his general position and ask what sort of motion actualizes appearing, i.e., makes its structures applicable to sentient organisms. Our questions will be: What are the characteristics of the motion required to actualize consciousness? How does such motion result in experience—i.e., in our ability not just to register contents, but to be aware of such registering? In examining these issues, we will have recourse to Husserl's descriptions of our consciousness of time. In particular, we shall examine his accounts of short term memory and anticipation—in his terminology, retention and protention—in their role in giving us a sense of time. We will then inquire into the type of motion that actualizes the relations of retention and protention. Such motion, we will argue, is essentially recursive. It involves repeatedly performing an action on the result of this action. In the case of retention, this means retaining some impression, then retaining this retained impression and then retaining the retention of this retained impression and so on. It is through such a chain of retentions of retentions of an originally given content, we will argue, that consciousness is actualized as an