

comes, reasonably enough, from the discussion of consciousness by Western academics working in a Western context, with the implicit ontological and methodological assumptions that this entails. In many Eastern traditions, the study of consciousness has proceeded for millennia with profoundly different assumptions. Western philosophers who have engaged with Eastern traditions, especially those who are experienced meditators, approach consciousness in a characteristically different way that often avoids some of the difficulties Gasparyan points out (e.g., Metzinger 2003). A postmodern synthesis of Eastern traditions and Western panpsychism may help to avoid some of the dead ends to which Gasparyan draws our attention.

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## Consciousness as Self-Description and the Inescapability of Reduction

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**> Upshot** • I argue that a philosophy of consciousness refocused on second-order cybernetics in the way proposed by Gasparyan could not replace the reductionist program because the question of reduction would arise again within the framework of such an approach.

« 1 » Diana Gasparyan proposes applying the principles of second-order cybernetics (SOC) to the philosophy of consciousness as an alternative to the traditional approach, which is supposedly based

on first-order cybernetics (FOC). The new approach is very ambitious and, if successful, may radically shift the paradigm in the study of consciousness.

« 2 » Interestingly, the application of SOC principles results in a theory of consciousness that resembles the classical phenomenology. Both theories aim to provide a holistic understanding of cognition without separating an observer from his experiences and environment. The proposed theory distinguishes itself from the classical phenomenology, declaring “the experience of differences is more primary than intentionality” (§65).

« 3 » There are various other aspects of the application of SOC principles in the philosophy of consciousness. I concentrate only on one. My major concern is the promise to get rid of the reductionist agenda in the study of consciousness. Gasparyan’s new theory promises to escape reductionism and to provide a coherent self-description of consciousness. I argue that it actually includes the problem of reduction.

« 4 » The author says that the task of reductionism in the philosophy of consciousness “is to reduce consciousness to various types of objective essences” and it “manifests itself in the search for other external reasons for consciousness, such as language, culture, and society” (§7). If it is possible to fulfill the reductionist’s task, then consciousness fully depends upon something else that is not consciousness. If we assume that consciousness depends upon a number of factors X, then, in a metaphysical sense, X are prior to consciousness and X are more basic than consciousness.

« 5 » It is hard to overestimate the appeal of the idea of the reduction of consciousness. Reduction of consciousness could help us to explain consciousness in scientific terms, it unifies the ontology and there are many philosophical arguments for reductionism. On the other hand, reductionism raises the concern that reduction does not explain consciousness but eliminates it. In effect, it just substitutes the phenomenon of consciousness with a list of external factors. The concern is clearly expressed in the target article and it serves as justification for replacing reductionism “with a strategy whereby consciousness will be talked about in the language of consciousness” (§16).

« 6 » There are objections to attempts to study consciousness within the domain of the individual mind. For the sake of the argument, I would like to avoid going into these debates and would like to embrace the proposed methodology. My aim is to show that even if we agree with the initial premises and methodology of SOC in the study of consciousness, the question of reduction would arise yet again. In other words, Gasparyan claims that the “non-normal” theory of consciousness (§§25f) would replace the reductionist program with a self-description. However, after that, the reduction just does not seem to go away.

« 7 » The “non-normal” theory of consciousness proceeds from the premise that “consciousness can be seen as an example of the autopoietic system, knowledge of which is generated by the same system” (§15). Consciousness is the source, and at the same time the instrument, of acquiring knowledge of itself. The application of SOC principles means that we should not try to describe our consciousness from the “external observer” point of view.

« 8 » The main instrument of the study of consciousness for the “non-normal” theory is self-description without postulating a subject–object dualism and the objective world. The self-description should be as rich as our own consciousness; otherwise, it is not adequate. The self-description has different modes, levels and content. The latter does not become salient; it exists as “bundle of internal differences, where some parts, being differentiated, allow the existence of others” (§46). According to the “non-normal” theory, a core feature of self-description of consciousness is various differentiations.

« 9 » Gasparyan has presented an elaborate theoretical model of self-description in terms of differences, but there are not many actual examples of such descriptions in the article. In this regard let us see how self-description in terms of differences give rise to the problem of reduction in three easy and, I suppose, universal steps:

- a There are parts of consciousness (experiences) that differentiate themselves by claims that they have consciousness. I call these experiences persons or people.
- b All people I have ever encountered have a relationships with other experiences. These experiences are their individual

characteristics and factors around them. Some of those characteristics are related to claims about consciousness and some are not. For example, hair color has nothing to do with consciousness, but the attachment of the head to the body does seem to be very relevant factor.

C In the self-description of my consciousness, I can search for the list of characteristics and factors that are necessary and sufficient for claims about consciousness.

« 10 » In the third step, the question of reduction arises anew. During these steps of self-description of consciousness, I have followed the methodology presented in the target article (§32). I described my consciousness in the first person with active verbs and I acknowledged my presence as observer. Nevertheless, in the third step, I faced the question of reduction. Even if I had constructed the problem of reduction and had never perceived it directly, it is still the same problem, arising this time from the self-description of consciousness.

« 11 » The search for the list of characteristics and factors that are necessary and sufficient for claims about consciousness is the question of reduction. The search for the list is the “search for other external reasons for consciousness” (§7) and this is the task of the reduction. The characteristics and factors are internal parts of my consciousness, so I still do not postulate any objective world. However, the list is external to people, since the experience of people and the experience of the factors and characteristics in the list are different.

« 12 » The list does not even have to be the complete list of necessary and sufficient conditions. It may well be the case that consciousness is such a vague state that it is impossible to provide its comprehensive self-description or set rigid boundaries. The list may be more like Wittgenstein’s family resemblance concept. Yet the search for this list would be a question of reduction of consciousness because the phenomenon in question could have various reasons (causes).

« 13 » In the target article, Gasparyan has compared the experience of consciousness to performative utterances (§§27–30). *Prima facie*, it may look like this move is anti-reductionist because performative ut-

terances are self-affirming. In fact, it is also compatible with the question of reduction. To be successful, the performative utterance depends on certain external factors. For instance, to name a ship, one must have the appropriate authority and one can only do it at the right time and at the right place. The same applies to consciousness: claims about consciousness – even autobiographical claims – depend on certain factors.

« 14 » One possible criticism of the proposed steps to reduction is to say that claims about the existence of the consciousness of others are not autobiographical and hence are not the part of an autopoietic system, which consciousness essentially is. These claims about consciousness bring back into discussion the third-person perspective and the objective world, which must be avoided in the new approach. That is how the problem of reduction appeared in the first place.

« 15 » On closer examination of the proposed steps, it is evident that I do not postulate the existence of people or anything else. The word “people,” etc., just refers to various parts of my consciousness. I do not see how anyone could conceivably deny the existence of the experience of others in the self-description of consciousness.

« 16 » Furthermore, Gasparyan distinguishes access to the world and access to the other interpretations of the world. We do not have the former but we have the latter (§73). The interpretations of the world are not equal, some of them are better, some of them worse. Claims by other people that they have consciousness are their interpretations of the world. These interpretations are very convincing. A curious mind should start to wonder why such interpretations happen at all and what are the reasons for them – and with that very inquiry the question of reduction arises anew.

« 17 » If the arguments I have presented are sound, then the self-description of consciousness in terms of differences does not remove the question of reduction. Even if epistemological and ontological reductions are impossible, there is no contradiction between self-description and the search for other external reasons for consciousness. The theory of consciousness as self-description in terms of differences may be a useful tool for the study of mind. It may even grasp the essence of consciousness. Still, the ques-

tion of why consciousness happens this way would remain, and this is the search for external reasons for consciousness – hence the question of reduction.

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## The Non-Relationality of Consciousness

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> **Upshot** • I focus on Gasparyan’s claim that consciousness should be understood analogously to the performative speech acts. I am inclined to agree with her position, but shall, at the same time, try to show that there is no need to maintain a relational character of consciousness, where the relation would be taking place between an act of consciousness and its content. A non-relational character of consciousness could be – according to my view – based upon a modal nature of consciousness and mental states, conceived on the model of sensory modalities.

« 1 » In one of the most intriguing books of the last decade of the 20th century in cognitive science, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch developed a new approach to the phenomenon of consciousness. They insisted on abandoning a purely scientific, third-person methodology