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Causation and Consciousness

Contemporary dualism proposes that in order to admit consciousness into the domain of an all inclusive science, we need to extend our conception of causation to allow that conscious experience can be caused by physical brain processes. On the surface, this appears to be a reasonable proposition. If we examine science pragmatically, a cause effect relationship is acknowledged when we find a plausible hypothesis that can accurately predict the future state of a system, given sufficient information about initial conditions. So, it would appear that if we developed a theory of consciousness that could accurately predict conscious experience on the basis of physical brain processes, then we would have a scientifically acceptable cause effect relationship.

In this paper we argue that such a notion of cause and effect is not scientific, because it is not neutral. It carries within it an ontological commitment to the existence of a physical reality that is not supported by scientific observation. On the contrary, quantum physics can be interpreted as saying that underlying the appearance of physical existence there is a world of superposed possibility, only connected to perceptual experience via probabilistic mathematical relationships that call our whole notion of physicality into question.

Further, the practice of science requires that hypotheses are confirmed or disconfirmed on the basis of observation and not vice versa. In purely neutral, scientific terms, it is a hypothesis that atoms, molecules and neurons possess an independent and causally effective existence in physical spacetime, and not a fact. Facts are observations, and observations occur within the domain of conscious experience. Therefore, to assert that physical brain processes cause conscious experience is equivalent to asserting that a hypothesis can cause a fact. As we shall demonstrate, this introduces a circularity into scientific reasoning that undermines its foundation.