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A Review On Transparency Of The Human Mind

İnsan Zihninin Şeffaflığı Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme

*Ahmet Kadir Uslu**

Abstract

Rene Descartes radically changed our conception of the human mind when he identified the essence of the mind as consciousness. According to this Cartesian view, the mind is identical with consciousness. In other words, it is transparent. In contemporary philosophy, however, this thesis does not seem strong and convincing enough. This study aims to discuss why the Cartesian conception of the mind is wrong, based on the views of some important philosophers. In doing so, since we think that the Classical Cartesian view is sufficiently discussed and known in the philosophical literature, we will include more recent philosophical arguments on the subject rather than constantly referring to Descartes' own thoughts. Then, we will conclude that the classical Cartesian view is untenable. Nevertheless, a weakened version of it can be defended.

Keywords: Mind, Transparency, Consciousness, Cartesian, Mental.

*Sorumlu Yazar/Corresponding author: Arş.Gör.Dr., Çankırı Karatekin Üniversitesi, ahmetkadiruslu@karatekin.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-9134-0059.

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Özet

Zihin felsefesinin en önemli temsilcilerinden birisi olan Rene Descartes insan zihninin doğasını bilinçle özdeşleştirdiğinde, zihin kavramımızda önemli bir değişiklik meydana gelmiş oldu. Çünkü Kartezyen görüşte, zihin ve bilinç birbiriyle özdeş olarak nitelendirildi. Bu düşünceye göre, zihin şeffaf bir yapıya sahiptir. Fakat bu tarz bir zihin anlayışı modern felsefede yeterince güçlü ve ikna edici bir yer edinmemiştir. Bu çalışma, Kartezyen zihin anlayışının neden yanlış olduğunu bazı önemli filozofların görüşlerinden yola çıkarak tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bunu yaparken de Klasik Kartezyen görüşün felsefi literatürde yeterince tartışıldığını ve bilindiğini düşündüğümüz için sürekli Descartes'ın kendi düşüncelerine atıf vermekten ziyade konuyla ilgili daha güncel felsefi argümanlara yer verilecektir. Son olarak, klasik Kartezyen görüşün yeterince güçlü olmadığı vurgulanıp, daha yumuşatılmış bir Kartezyen zihin anlayışının savunulabileceği belirtilerek çalışma noktalacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Zihin, Şeffaflık, Bilinç, Kartezyen, Zihinsel.

Introduction

Our understanding of the mind underwent a significant transformation in the seventeenth century, when René Descartes characterized its essence as consciousness. This Cartesian¹ perspective posits that the mind is fundamentally a thinking entity synonymous with consciousness (Simmons, 2011). As noted by Armstrong (1999), this view profoundly shaped Western philosophical discourse regarding the mind for the next three hundred years. To fully grasp the concept of the Cartesian mind, a more detailed examination is necessary. This paper aims to argue against the Cartesian perspective, asserting that the mind is not self-transparent. We will begin by analyzing Descartes' thesis concerning the human mind. Subsequently, we will explore the viewpoints of contemporary philosophers who challenge the Cartesian notion. Additionally, we will support these philosophical critiques by incorporating Freud's insights on the human mind. In conclusion, we will propose a defense for a modified interpretation of the Cartesian mind.

Before discussing the topic, we need to see what Descartes thinks about the human mind. In his famous book *Meditations*, Descartes says: "The mind can be perceived distinctly and completely, or at least sufficiently so to be considered a complete thing, without any of those forms or attributes on the basis of which we recognize that body is a substance, as I think I showed sufficiently clearly in the Second Meditation; and the body is understood distinctly and as a complete thing, without those attributes that pertain to the mind" (2008: 143-144). As we have seen, Descartes conceives the mind completely different from the body.

1. Mind and Consciousness

Now, if we address consciousness in relation to the mind, it is a contentious topic within philosophy; yet it is typically viewed as a specific function of the human mind. Consider an individual who has experienced a severe traffic accident and consequently exhibits no mental functions (neither thought nor sensation). This person exists in a vegetative state. Under these circumstances, it appears inappropriate to assert that he possesses consciousness at this moment. Regarding this, D. M. Armstrong says that "we can conclude that consciousness is an activity of the mind" (Armstrong, 1999: 13). But we see that Descartes refined this premise. He proposed that consciousness constitutes the fundamental nature of the human mind. He asserts that the mind remains in a state of awareness as long as it exists, indicating that we are perpetually conscious of our mental processes during their occurrence. In Descartes' view,

¹ Cartesian: means of or relating to the French philosopher Rene Descartes – from his Latinized name Cartesius.

unconscious mental activity cannot occur. In Armstrong's words, "If mental activity M, occurs in person P, at time T, then, for Descartes, P is aware of M at T" (1999: 15).

We know that Descartes builds on his premise by asserting that our awareness of mental processes is inherently reliable, as it cannot be mistaken. Additionally, Cartesian view posits that all occurrences within the mind are within the reach of consciousness, suggesting that the mind is self-transparent. As noted by Sarah K. Paul (2014), the notion of transparency has captivated numerous philosophers. For instance, John Locke, in his critique of innate ideas, acknowledges Descartes' proposition that the mind must possess a degree of self-transparency. Jonathan Bennett (1994) explains that, according to Locke, there is no element of thought that exists in our minds without our awareness. Locke himself states that: "to imprint anything on the mind without the mind's perceiving it seems to me hardly intelligible" (Locke, 1975: 49).

It is important to clarify a potential misunderstanding. The term "transparency" is employed in two distinct contexts (epistemic and metaphysical) in conversations regarding the mind. Initially, Descartes addressed its epistemic application. In this context, "transparency" refers to a thesis concerning incorrigibility or infallibility, which can be summarized as follows: "A person cannot be wrong in her judgments about her own mental states by saying that "the mind is transparent to itself" (Kind, 2003: 225). Rasmus Jensen also defines the transparency thesis thus: "any conscious experience is immediately given to the subject in a way that makes all intrinsic features of the experience available to be known in a non-inferentially and infallible way" (Jensen, 2012: 1). On the other hand, the metaphysical application of the transparency thesis pertains to experience. Kind explains it thus: "Experience is said to be transparent in the sense that we "see" right through it to the object of that experience, analogously to the way we see through a pane of glass to whatever is on the other side of it" (Kind, 2003: 226). In essence, Kind suggests that the claim of transparency pertains to the nature of experience and its underlying metaphysical framework. Nevertheless, we will examine the transparency thesis within the framework of the epistemic application we previously addressed.

Furthermore, Gary Hatfield (2011) posits that the Cartesian mental framework can be characterized by four primary elements: consciousness as the core essence, intentionality as purely mental, the veil of perception, and the transparency of the mind. Specifically:

1. The essence of "the mental," which is consciousness, is viewed by the Cartesian perspective as an immaterial substance.
2. Intentionality is seen as distinct from the physical realm and is considered a unique feature of the mind.

3. A veil of perception creates a separation between the mind and its direct epistemic relationship with the material world.

4. Transparency is identified as a key attribute of the mind; for instance, when experiencing a mental state, such as a thought or emotion, the mind is aware of it.

Cartesians assert that the mind is inherently transparent, positing that every mental state is both conscious and undeniably understood. In summary, the transparency thesis encompasses two main aspects: Firstly, individuals are conscious of all their thoughts and mental states; secondly, they possess indubitable knowledge regarding these mental states (Hatfield, 2011). Descartes clarifies the term “thought” in the *Meditations*, saying, “I use the term thought to cover everything that is in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it. Thus, all operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination, and the senses are thoughts” (Descartes, 2008: 102). On the other hand, he claims that “there can be nothing in the mind, in so far as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not conscious” (Descartes, 2008: 158). But this assumption often raises the inquiry of whether infants possess consciousness and exhibit mental activity, even while in the womb. Descartes answers this question as follows: “I do not doubt that the mind, as soon as it is infused into the body of an infant, begins to think, and is at the same time conscious of its thinking, even if afterwards it does not remember what it has thought, because the forms of these thoughts do not remain in the memory” (Descartes, 2008: 159). In summary, Descartes posits that even very young children are capable of having thoughts. Nonetheless, they remain unaware of these thoughts due to their inability to retain memories.

As Simon (2011) observes, contemporary views often regard this assertion as rather simplistic and inaccurate. However, Jensen (2012) contends that Descartes' reasoning can be moderated since the Cartesian understanding of the mind does not inherently require adherence to his robust transparency thesis. Jensen proposes that a more nuanced interpretation of the transparency thesis can be articulated in the following manner: “Any feature of a conscious (my addition) experience that belongs intrinsically to the experience is immediately, i.e. non-inferentially accessible to the subject of the experience, and this special access is available independently of any access to the outer world” (Jensen, 2012: 2). He subsequently asserts that this may represent a variation of the Cartesian view of the mind, where the ability to introspectively access thoughts is regarded as the fundamental characteristic of anything inherently related to the mental realm.

However, numerous critics also dismiss the less robust interpretations of the transparency thesis. Armstrong (1999), for instance, categorically refutes the concept of a completely transparent mind, arguing that it poses a significant problem for the philosophy of

mind. He employs the metaphor of an iceberg to illustrate the nature of the human mind, suggesting that it functions as an epistemological iceberg containing many elements of which we are unaware. Furthermore, he contends that the mind is inherently prone to errors. In this regard, Armstrong (1999) proposes three anti-Cartesian theses regarding the mind that warrant acceptance: First, mental states do not necessarily require mental activities such as thoughts. Second, individuals can occasionally be oblivious to their ongoing mental activities or states. Lastly, a person's awareness of their own current mental states (or mental activities) may be inaccurate.

David Rosenthal (1997) claims that mental states can exist independently of consciousness. He asserts that a meaningful understanding of consciousness would be unattainable if every mental state was conscious or if consciousness were integral to those states. Rosenthal suggests that the notion that all mental states are conscious is not self-evident. It appears evident that there exists a realm in our minds where mental states lack consciousness. We sometimes notice that individuals desire or contemplate something prior to recognizing that desire or thought. Additionally, there are instances when we become aware of our own unhappiness or anger only after friends point it out. Thus, perceptual sensations can manifest even when we are not conscious of them. Moreover, it remains a contentious point whether physical sensations, such as pain, can occur without our awareness. For instance, in the event of an accident or serious injury, we may not register our pain immediately. It is only after some time that we begin to experience that pain.

Rosenthal contends that it is possible to assert that all mental states are conscious, as unconscious states are merely dispositions. Therefore, only occurrent states can be regarded as genuine mental states, and all of these would inherently be conscious. In response to this argument, Rosenthal (1997) points out that the claim relies on two distinct interpretations of the term “dispositional.” One interpretation sees a “dispositional state” merely as a potential to enter an occurrent mental state, while the other views it as a mental state that can be partially characterized in dispositional terms. In the first interpretation, the disposition can coexist with the occurrence of a mental state. Conversely, in the second interpretation, this is not the case. Typically, the dispositional states we discuss align with the latter interpretation. For instance, the term “flammable” denotes both a potential to ignite and an actual event. Similarly, mental states often reflect this duality. Since we determine unconscious mental states based on their dispositional links to other entities, it follows that these unconscious mental states can be seen as dispositional in the latter sense. However, this does not imply that they are not also occurrent states.

Elsewhere, Rosenthal (1991) observes that the assertion that every mental state is conscious can attract some individuals. In fact, it may appear confusing to consider what constitutes a mental state if it is not conscious. Viewed this way, such mental states could be regarded as unusual instances that necessitate further clarification. They are likely dispositional or cognitive states that may exist without consciousness yet are still classified as mental states. Ludwig Kirk, for example, states that: “your belief that Australia lies in the Antipodes was not a conscious belief (or an occurrent belief) just a moment ago. You were not thinking that, though you believed it. It was a dispositional, as opposed to an occurrent, belief” (Kirk, 2003: 5). However, Rosenthal (1991) contests this idea, arguing that conscious states are merely mental states that we recognize. In contrast, unconscious states refer to mental states that we are not immediately aware of. Thus, he suggests that there is no essential distinction between conscious and unconscious states.

In summary, there appears to be no justification for believing that sensory qualities cannot manifest unconsciously. The sole distinction between the various sensory qualities of unconscious sensations and those of conscious sensations lies in their state of consciousness. Rosenthal (1997) contends that it is impossible to demonstrate that all sensory states are conscious states. Furthermore, there are significant theoretical objections to this assertion. According to Rosenthal, if every mental state was conscious, it would be logically unfeasible to elucidate the essence of consciousness. He (1997) states that a definition of what it means for mental states to be conscious must either reference mental states or avoid doing so. If we assume that all mental states are conscious and our attempt to define consciousness references mental states, the explanation becomes circular. In this scenario, referencing mental states inherently refers to conscious states, which trivializes the explanation and renders it uninformative.

Before Rosenthal, Leibniz had already raised critiques against Descartes regarding this matter. According to Leibniz (1996), it is not feasible for us to consciously reflect on every single thought we have. If we were to accept that we could, the mind would become trapped in an endless cycle of contemplation, endlessly reflecting on each thought without ever progressing to new ones. For instance, if I am mindful of a current emotion, I would need to consider that I am also reflecting on that emotion, and then I would have to acknowledge that I am thinking about that reflection, and so forth. Ultimately, there must come a point where I cease these layers of thought to allow for new ideas to emerge spontaneously. Otherwise, I would remain fixated on the same thought indefinitely.

This reasoning parallels the concept of infinite causal sequences. For instance, if we assert that all entities in the universe are causally reliant on others, it prompts the question of identifying the initial cause. Imagine that A serves as the primary cause of all things in existence (A>B>C>D...). However, A itself necessitates a cause, leading to an endless regression.

Consequently, Rosenthal asserts that a substantial and enlightening account of state consciousness can be formulated if we accept the existence of unconscious mental states. Conversely, there are those who may argue that every sensory state is conscious, although he acknowledges the presence of unconscious intentional states. It remains unproven whether this modified viewpoint would hinder the development of a meaningful explanation of consciousness. Nonetheless, if we accept that every sensory state is conscious, Rosenthal contends that defining consciousness as an inherent characteristic of sensory states would serve as the most effective explanation for this assertion. However, we face challenges in articulating the nature of consciousness in mental states if we claim that all mental states are conscious. This complexity arises when consciousness is viewed as an intrinsic attribute of mental states, even if not every mental state is conscious.

Indeed, Rosenthal (1997) contends that we should dismiss the notion that all mental states are conscious and that consciousness is an inherent characteristic of these states. This rejection is necessary to clarify the meaning of consciousness in relation to mental states, as adhering to a Cartesian perspective obstructs our ability to provide a coherent explanation of consciousness.

In addition to the philosophical objections to the transparency thesis, there are other counterarguments as well. For instance, Freud's theory of the mind has significantly altered our understanding of mental processes in the twentieth century. As previously discussed, for a long time in the realms of science and philosophy, mental activities were largely viewed as conscious. However, Freud's model introduced the concept of the unconscious, revealing that the human mind accommodates unconscious mental states.

Timothy Wilson (2002) states that Freud's conceptualization of the mind presents two distinct categories of unconscious processes. The first category encompasses thoughts that are not currently at the forefront of our awareness, such as the hue of our first vehicle. Freud posits that this type of information exists within the preconscious and can readily be accessed if we direct our attention to it. Additionally, there is a significant reservoir of primitive and childlike thoughts that are kept from conscious awareness due to the physical discomfort they may cause. This repression serves a purpose beyond mere distraction. Conversely, Freud's later structural model of the mind introduces a greater degree of complexity by categorizing unconscious

processes among the ego, superego, and id. Nonetheless, he maintains an emphasis on primitive and instinctual unconscious reasoning. He characterizes conscious thought as being more rational and refined in comparison to unconscious thought.

In summary, Freud identifies two categories of unconscious processes within the human psyche. The first consists of thoughts that can be brought to consciousness with focused attention, like the hue of one's first automobile. The second category includes thoughts that are intentionally suppressed for particular reasons; these thoughts are more instinctual and primal than the former and tend to be more insistent.

On the other hand, Wilson (2002) argues that the contemporary perspective suggests a more straightforward explanation for the presence of unconscious mental processes. Individuals cannot fully explore how various components of their minds operate, including fundamental functions such as perception, memory, and understanding of language. These aspects remain outside of conscious awareness, likely because they developed prior to the emergence of consciousness. Numerous recent studies indicate that the conscious mind does not serve as the primary source of our actions. Conversely, John Bargh (2008) argues that our behavioral urges are triggered unconsciously, with consciousness primarily acting to oversee these actions. Consider a scenario in which a man awakens one day to find himself seriously ill, discovering that the unconscious functions of his mind have ceased, leaving him reliant solely on his conscious thoughts and actions. How would he manage to cope?

Wilson (2002) asserts that if Descartes had been posed with this inquiry in the seventeenth century, his response would likely indicate that the remainder of his life would resemble the days he had previously experienced. Descartes maintained the view that the human mind does not engage in unconscious mental processes. However, it appears evident that Descartes was mistaken, as a person's life would indeed differ from how it was prior to an illness. Wilson says this: "In fact it makes little sense to imagine what it would be like to have only conscious mind, because consciousness itself is dependent on mental processes that occur out of view. We could not be conscious without a nonconscious mind, just as what we see on the screen of a computer could not exist without a sophisticated system of hardware and software operating inside the box" (Wilson, 2002: 20). According to him, adaptive unconscious is essential to our mental processes. It gathers, evaluates, and categorizes information quickly and efficiently. Particularly in children, actions are often performed on autopilot, with the adaptive unconscious directing their behavior in specific manners before they become consciously aware of it. Skills such as implicit learning and implicit memory emerge prior to the capacity for complex conscious thought. For instance, infants can retain information

implicitly from birth or even while still in the womb. However, the ability to recall information explicitly does not develop until after the first year of life. Moreover, the brain regions associated with explicit memory mature later than those linked to implicit memory (Wilson, 2002).

However, when we acknowledge that individuals can think and behave unconsciously in a highly intricate manner, several questions emerge concerning the relationship between conscious and unconscious processing, particularly regarding how to differentiate between these two aspects of the mind. So, which one holds authority? Wilson (2002) suggests that they likely operate in a similar fashion and according to comparable principles. Just as humans possess two kidneys, there exists an additional system within the mind. Nevertheless, this notion cannot be entirely accurate, as the conscious and unconscious systems have evolved in distinct and complex manners and operate independently. Ultimately, it is reasonable to assert that Descartes and his Cartesian perspective were misguided. Consciousness and the mind are not synonymous, and neither are the mind and body composed of separate substances.

Conclusion

Lastly, Peter Carruthers is a contemporary philosopher who provides a significant critique of the self-transparency thesis. In his 2008 essay, he examines the Cartesian concept of a self-transparent mind, suggesting it may be an inherent part of our capacity for mind-reading. However, he notes that there is currently insufficient evidence to substantiate this assertion. The necessary evidence would involve the belief in the mind's self-transparency, which should be applicable to all individuals. Despite this, he contends that there is reasonable justification to think that the belief in the mind's self-transparency is either innately formed or implicitly integrated within our mind-reading capabilities. He argues that even with the presumption of this innateness, one could maintain that the transparency thesis is either valid or only marginally less valid.

Carruthers argues that there is no need for an alternative explanation as to why individuals might be inclined to accept the notion of transparency if they perceive their own minds as transparent. This belief is taken as self-evident. However, Carruthers contends that the concept of transparency is wholly, profoundly, and fundamentally incorrect. He acknowledges that there could be certain mechanisms that enable us to reliably perceive various mental states. Nevertheless, he questions how the approximate validity of the self-transparency thesis can elucidate the widespread acceptance of that thesis itself, as opposed to the mental states that this thesis pertains to. It is evident that there are numerous truths regarding the world, ourselves, and our methods of understanding reality that individuals do not abandon. One could

argue that the transparency of the mind is a type of mental characteristic to which we have direct access. However, this argument fails to hold. It is the mental actions of similar types that are believed to be clearly accessible, rather than the causal mechanisms that generate these states. Therefore, while our belief in the mind's transparency may be something we can easily access, alongside the conscious mental states that inform our intuitive thoughts, our access to these mental states is certainly not fundamentally transparent (Carruthers, 2008).

Even if the thesis presented is valid, Carruthers contends that the most plausible explanation for the self-transparency thesis is that it is either inherent or a direct consequence of the innate characteristics of the mind-reading ability. In his 2008 work, he also indicates that individuals lack immediate access to their own judgments and decisions. Instead, they become aware of these occurrences through a quick, unconscious process of self-interpretation. However, such interpretations are often confabulated and incorrect. Additionally, empirical evidence suggests that individuals struggle to differentiate between confabulation and introspection. Consequently, they find it challenging to determine whether their mental states are transparent to them.

According to Carruthers, one notable benefit of the innateness hypothesis is its ability to elucidate the belief in the mind's self-transparency within the context of Western philosophical tradition, extending to the transformative ideas introduced by Sigmund Freud. Additionally, the innateness hypothesis offers insight into the societal pressures that shape how ordinary individuals respond to scientific theories regarding the mind. Readers of Freud often assert that he posits a dual-mind theory, wherein the conscious and unconscious minds operate under distinct rules and functions. This perspective also helps individuals uphold their conviction in the self-transparency of the conscious mind. In summary, Carruthers argues that there are valid reasons to support the notion that the mind is self-transparent, although he acknowledges that his arguments are not entirely comprehensive.

It appears clear that Descartes' transparency thesis is entirely inaccurate and fails to accurately depict a realistic understanding of the mind. However, there remain contemporary adaptations and supporters of the Cartesian perspective. Howard Robinson, for example, argues that: "the mind must be simple, and this is possible only if it is something like a Cartesian substance" (Robinson, 2003: 95). The subject, or the thinking entity, must be regarded as a fundamental substance. Another thinker and psychologist, William James, says this: "the first and foremost concrete fact which everyone will affirm to belong to his inner experience is the fact that consciousness of some sort goes on" (James, 2003: 2). Kirk (2003) asserts that a state

or event qualifies as a mental state solely when it is an intentional state or when the individual experiencing it possesses awareness of it.

But the modern interpretations of the Cartesian perspective are also unpersuasive. As previously noted, there is substantial evidence indicating that the human mind lacks full self-transparency. However, more nuanced interpretations of the transparency thesis can be supported. One prominent philosopher, John Searle, presents a stance that aligns closely with the Cartesian viewpoint. He asserts that it should at least be feasible for mental states to be conscious and accessible. He says that: “the notion of an unconscious mental state implies accessibility to consciousness. We have no notion of the unconscious except as that which is potentially conscious” (Searle, 2002: 152). He likens unconscious mental states to fish residing in the deep ocean. Although these fish remain unseen beneath the surface, their form does not change as they swim into the depths. In a parallel manner, we sometimes stash away money at home for future use. When the time comes to access it, we simply retrieve it from its concealed location. While it is possible to forget where we have hidden it, we retain the knowledge that it remains in the same spot and holds value. Thus, unconscious mental states can be viewed as a form of currency that we recall when necessary.

In conclusion, given all this, it can be asserted that unconscious mental states are not enigmatic. They remain unconscious primarily because we do not recall them unless necessary. However, this does not imply that they are unreachable by consciousness.

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