Editorial

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Experience has been one of the central notions in philosophy and psychology for a long time, and its range of nuances with slightly or dramatically different meanings is unprecedented. The phrase “elusive or conclusive”, chosen as the motto for this issue of Mind and Matter, indicates one among the many dimensions along which these meanings unfold. Needless to say, different kinds of experience come with a whole bunch of different convictions concerning primacy and corresponding pretenses to dominace.

Elusive experience can be understood as referring to the immediacy of experience “here and now”; it is elusive in the literal sense that once it occurred it is memory of the past, before it occurs it is anticipation of the future. The elusive instant in which experience is actually present is only the present. Philosophers, in particular philosophers of mind, have paraphrased this as “how it is like to be”, “first-person account”, “qualia”, “irreducible subjectivity”, “introspection”, to list but a few examples of pertinent terminology.

However, experience can also acquire conclusive quality. The notion of experience features prominently in the empirical sciences (German: “Erfahrungswissenschaften”), where it simply refers to events “objectified” in the sense that anything which might induce elusivity is carefully precluded. A “third-person” observer perspective enables the scientist to discover lawful behavior, to infer causal interactions, and to classify the individual and particular into robust generalizations. And a mathematician working on a theorem will primarily emphasize the conclusiveness of the proof rather than the volatile feeling of satisfaction joining it.

No doubt, the conclusive knowledge of the sciences has been the conditio sine qua non, the fundament of modern technology and civilization. The sciences are ultimately based on the premise of a reliable and stable ground that remains solid even within most turbulent and unstable situations (by the way, a premise not so far from religious belief). But there is another side of the coin: as it turns out to be increasingly obvious over the years, the tremendous refinement and sophistication of life in modern societies with all their complex interdependencies has itself generated new potentials for instability and collapse.

The resulting return of the elusive is not only a collective and external phenomenon but has consequences for the inner reality of individual living beings as well. It is one of the important tasks of our time to reverse this return into a fertile and productive further development. One way to look
at this is to exploit the liberating power of unstable situations against the threat of their paralyzing force. Another way is to try and reconcile different kinds of experience lacking proper balance and study the relations between their characteristics. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, the field of consciousness studies is a particularly vivid arena for such activities.

The article by Robert Bishop discusses a key topic in the philosophy of mind, the so-called causal closure of the physical, from the viewpoint of a figure of thinking that can be found in virtually all great religions. It is known as the via negative argument and, more or less, tries to describe or define the “Divine” by what it is not. In a similar vein (but with clearly different purpose), some philosophers – most notably Papineau – have attempted to defend the causal closure of the physical vis-à-vis the mental by defining the physical as the non-mental. Bishop reconstructs and criticizes this argumentation and concludes that it does not supply compelling evidence against the possibility of non-physical causes for mental events.

Ioannis Antoniou and Theodoros Christidis propose a relation between a concept of time developed within the theory of complex systems, by Prigogine and his group in Brussels, and the ideas that Bergson expressed about time almost a century ago. Bergson emphasized that time is insufficiently understood by restricting it to the clock time of physics. His notion of durée (only roughly translated by “duration”) includes the significance of indeterminism, innovation, irreversibility and aging in temporal processes. The authors argue that the properties of a time operator as it can be constructed for complex systems resemble these features to a surprisingly great extent. What the formal time operator does not entail is the relation of Bergson’s time (and Husserl’s and Heidegger’s ideas about time) to memory and conscious experience.

In addition to “subjective” and “objective” forms of experience mentioned above, there is a third way of understanding experience, most prominently introduced by William James in an article of 1904. We reprint this article, today considered as a classic in philosophical psychology, in this issue because it presents substantial background for the two remaining papers by Seager and by Holbrook. For James, “pure experience” is the common ground without which the distinction of “thoughts and things”, “spirit and matter”, “soul and body”, “consciousness and brain” cannot be reasonably discussed.

The unfortunately mentalistic notion of experience that James used to characterize this common ground has been a persistent source of confusion. Other attempts, e.g. the notion of sensation proposed by Ernst Mach (“Empfindung”) and later by Bertrand Russell, share the same potential of misunderstanding. What is in fact intended is a term allowing us to transgress the distinctions leading to the mind-matter problem in the first place, in whatever shape it may be formulated. Two main philosophical
positions adhere to this idea: dual-aspect approaches (e.g. à la Spinoza) and neutral monism (e.g. à la Russell). An interesting question for the resulting conceptions is whether the common ground is neither mental nor physical or whether it is both mental and physical. These versions lead to different consequences deserving deeper exploration in the future.

Another unjustly discredited couple of mentalistically colored notions stands for the doctrine that something “mental” is a fundamental and ubiquitous aspect of reality rather than an offspring of highly evolved biological species: the notions of panpsychism and (alluding to James) panexperientialism. Of course, the idea is not that, say, electrons possess human consciousness – this would be palpably absurd, and at the same time far too cheap to ridicule the concept from the outset. William Seager, who has investigated the problems and prospects of panpsychism for a long time, discusses the particularly severe question, known since Leibniz’s monadology, of how complex mental states emerge from fundamental mental states. His solution to this problem is a novel form of aggregative emergence, which he proposes to embed in a framework alternative to both dual-aspect thinking and neutral monism.

Another concept of a common ground beneath the split of subject and object is outlined by Dwight Holbrook in his contribution. He refers to a number of contemporary writers (e.g. Franck, Metzinger, Nagel, Velmans) to demonstrate similarities with their thinking, but he also clearly delineates his own approach from theirs. The category of the “background” which he develops is accessible only in terms of first-person accounts, it is undivided and object-free, and yet it is not ineffable or transcendent. Connotations with current discussions of “non-conceptual experience” come to mind which the author does not pick up. Rather, he specifies examples in which direct access to the “background” is possible: perceptual fusion, perceptual projection, the experience of the here-and-now and, most acuminated, authentic you-and-me encounters of persons genuinely sharing experiences.