The Hard Problem of Consciousness

(Dr. Robert Prentner, guest lecture, Oct 12, 2017)

What exactly is the hard problem? What does it rule out, what does it say?
The Hard Problem of Consciousness

• “Why is all this information-processing accompanied by an experienced inner life? If any problem qualifies as the problem of consciousness, it is this one” (David Chalmers)

• The hard problem aims at physicalism - the idea that everything that exists is purely physical and that all facts are physical facts. According to physicalism, consciousness were physical and every fact about consciousness is a physical fact. The problem of consciousness would reduce to the problem of finding a physical mechanism.
The Hard Problem of Consciousness

• Contrast this to the “easy problems”:
  1. The ability to discriminate, categorize, and react to environmental stimuli
  2. The integration of information by a cognitive system
  3. The reportability of mental states
  4. The ability of a system to access its own internal states
  5. Directing attention to something
  6. The deliberate control of behavior
  7. The difference between wakefulness and sleep

• Do you find any pattern or a systematic distinction between easy/hard problems?
The functional/phenomenal distinction

• Example 1: Having access to information
• Example 2: Binding of sensory information

• There is an “explanatory gap” (Levine 1983) between stories about brain function and about the corresponding phenomenology
Some related questions

1) *Why is it* that some brain states give rise to experiences at all?
   • We want a theory to answer the why-question.

2) *Why is it* that this brain state gives rise to that experience instead of another one?
   • We want a theory of consciousness to be specific.
3) How does the brain create consciousness?
   • This question suggests that some information becomes conscious/phenomenal. “And then, what happens?” (Daniel Dennett)

4) What is the origin of consciousness? What is it good for?
   • This is suggest an evolutionary approach. Does evolution play an important role wrt to consciousness? Why/why not?
5) How could qualia exist in the physical world? How is the existence of qualia consistent with physicalism?

- This is a *metaphysical* question. If everything that exists is physical, how can there be things like qualia?
  - Either qualia are physical, and we would be wrong to think otherwise...
  - Or physicalism is wrong.

BUT: Can we be wrong about the nature of qualia (cf. later parts of lecture)? Do we have any clear sense what phycialism is all about (i.e. what is matter and panpsychism)? Is this all just nonsense, and did we make some conceptual error along the way?
How to argue for the Hard Problem?

1. The Zombie argument

- Zombies are conceivable. Therefore, Zombies are possible. Therefore, physicalism is wrong.

- Zombie = perfect physical duplicate of us but without consciousness. If Z. are possible, there need to be something in addition to the physical states. “God needed to do something more after he conceived the physical world” (e.g. he needed to create “souls”)

- But one could doubt that Zombies are conceivable OR that conceivability entails possibility.
Conceivability vs. Imaginability vs. Possibility (1)

- There are various senses of conceivability.
- Conceivability in the Zombie-argument: To conceive of st. means to have a coherent concept of it.
  - Example: We could conceive of infinity even though we could not imagine infinity
- And similarly for possibility: Something might not be possible in the real world; but it could be possible in principle
  - Example: Napoleon could have won the war
  - Some things could be impossible even in this sense, but still they are logically possible. Logically, the world could have come into existence such that...
Conceivability vs. Imaginability vs. Possibility

- Are these things conceivable/imaginable/possible? In which sense? Why or why not?

- Round squares
- Countable infinities
- Infinite sums (e.g. $\sum_\infty 1/n^2$)
- Apples falling upward
- Time running backwards
- A perpetuum mobile
- The moon is made out of cheese
Conceivability vs. Imaginability vs. Possibility (2)

• Conceivability in the Zombie-argument: The concept of a Zombie is logically coherent and not contradictory in itself.

• Possibility in the Zombie-argument: There could exist a (very different) universe in which Zombies are possible.

• Importantly: Neither the facts that Zombies are not imaginable nor possible in the actual world are enough to reject the Zombie-argument against physicalism.
But are Zombies really conceivable?

• Is conceivability contingent on our having a certain theory/world view?
  • “Type A materialists”: There really are not such things as (unphysical) qualia, thus we are all Zombies but act (and think!) as if we were not.
  • Apparent conceivability could be “explained away,” given certain theories. But is this really the case?
  • Try to argue that consciousness is an illusion. Compare consciousness to “other” illusions or false beliefs. What is different?

• “Panpsychists”: All matter is conscious, thus Zombies are not conceivable.
But are Zombies really conceivable?

- Is conceivability historically relative?
  - Conceivability depends on our conceptual faculties. Conceptual faculties are not fixed; they evolve biologically and culturally.

- Is it a fact of the matter whether something is conceivable or not?
How to argue for the Hard Problem?

2. The knowledge argument: Mary the neuroscientist

• Mary is a brilliant neuroscientist; she knows everything she could know about color vision in terms of physics. But Mary lives in a black/white room and she hasn’t ever experienced colors herself.

• If we free Mary from her black/white room, she will experience colors. Has she thereby learnt anything new?

  • If yes, does this mean that there are “unphysical facts”?
  • If no, what exactly is different?
Some possible reactions

• There are no additional facts. Seeing colors and knowing about colors are different kinds of things (similar to “know how” vs. “know that”)
  • experience as ability vs. experience as knowledge

• There are additional facts about qualia; thus, qualia exist.
  • Qualia are unphysical (see premise) but epiphenomenal (because of the ”causal closure” of physics).

• Experiencing colors means to actualize a different kind of relation to the physical world.
  • The way it is like to experience color is the way a physical property (e.g. surface reflectance) is represented by a system (NB: the phenomenology of something is necessarily tied to the function of representing it to Mary!)
Representing the world as qualitative

• „Qualia are nothing but the properties things in the physical world are represented as having“ (Fred Dretske)

- Why are such representations useful?
  - They have the *function* of pointing to properties in the environment
  - That is, they provide the organism with *information* about the environment

- But could this idea make sense of qualia?
  - Only if it could be shown how qualia underly the future behavior of a physical system OR if it could be shown that qualia are „spandrels.“
  - What are these „physical properties“ that get represented anyway?
  - The contents of experience are (most likely) very different from the physical properties of things in the world.

- Could you think of a reply to the Zombie argument?
A science of consciousness?

• Does the hard problem imply that a science of consciousness is impossible? Why/why not.

• Is *subjectivity* an obstacle? Why/why not
Correlation vs. Causation

• Neuroscience of consciousness is about finding correlates between consciousness and brain states
  • But “neural correlates” of consciousness are not identical to “neural causes” of consciousness

• Could there be systematic links between consciousness and brain states? What would this imply? What needed to be done?
What-is-it-likeness – a pseudo-problem?

• What is it like to be a bat? What are the contents and structure of a bats inner life?

vs

• Is it something like to be a bat? How is consciousness distributed in the world?
Subjectivity vs. objectivity

• Is consciousness too “airy-fairy and touchy-feely” for scientific study? (John Searle)

• Epistemological/ontological distinction
  • Brain states: ontologically and epistemologically objective
  • Art and values: ontologically and epistemologically subjective
  • Money: Ontologically subjective and epistemologically objective
  • Consciousness: ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective?
  • God: ontologically objective but epistemologically subjective?
Literature

• **Some philosophical “classics”**
  • Nagel, Thomas (1974): What is it like to be a bat?, *Phil. Rev. 83*: 435 – 450.

• **For masochists only (!)**
  • Chalmers, David (2009): The two-dimensional argument against materialism

• **Scientific models of consciousness**