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Science

What Hard Problem?

Our philosophical science correspondent **Massimo Pigliucci** asks.

The philosophical study of consciousness is chock full of thought experiments: John Searle's Chinese Room, David Chalmers' Philosophical Zombies, Frank Jackson's Mary's Room, and Thomas Nagel's 'What is it like to be a bat?' among others. Many of these experiments and the endless discussions that follow them are predicated on what Chalmers famously referred to as the 'hard' problem of consciousness: for him, it is 'easy' to figure out how the brain is capable of perception, information integration, attention, reporting on mental states, etc, even though this is far from being accomplished at the moment. What is 'hard', claims the man of the p-zombies, is to account for *phenomenal experience*, or what philosophers usually call 'qualia': the 'what is it like', first-person quality of consciousness.

I think that the idea of a hard problem of consciousness arises from a category mistake. I think that in fact there is no real distinction between hard and easy problems of consciousness, and the illusion that there is one is caused by the pseudo-profundity that often accompanies category mistakes.

A category mistake occurs when you try to apply a conceptual category to a given problem or object, when in fact that conceptual category simply does not belong to the problem or object at hand. For instance, if I were to ask you about the color of triangles, you could be caught off guard and imagine that I have some brilliant, perhaps mystical, insight into the nature of triangles that somehow makes the category 'color' relevant to their description as geometrical figures. But of course this would be a mistake (on my part as well as on yours): triangles are characterized by angles, dimensions, and the ratios among their sides, but definitely *not* by colors.

The same, I am convinced, goes for Chalmers' hard problem (or Nagel's question, and so on). The hard problem is often formulated as the problem of accounting for *how* and *why* we have phenomenal experience. Chalmers and Nagel think that even when all the scientific facts are in (which will take a lot more time, by the way) we will still be missing something fundamental. This led Chalmers to endorse a form of dualism, and Nagel to reject the current scientific understanding (which amounts to pretty much the same thing, really).

Let's unpack this. *Why* phenomenal consciousness exists is a typical question for evolutionary biology. Consciousness is a biological phenomenon, like blood circulation, so its appearance in a certain lineage of hominids seems to be squarely a matter for evolutionary biologists to consider (they also have a very nice story to tell about the evolution of the heart). Not that I expect an answer any time soon, and possibly ever. Historical questions about behavioral traits are notoriously difficult to tackle, particularly when there are so few (any?) other species to adequately compare ourselves with, and when there isn't much that the fossil record can tell us about it, either. Second, *how* phenomenal consciousness is possible is a question for cognitive science, neurobiology and the like. If you were asking how the heart works, you'd be turning to anatomy and molecular biology, and I see no reason things should be different in the case of consciousness.

But once you have answered the how and the why of consciousness, what else is there to say? "Ah!" exclaim Chalmers, Nagel and others, "You still have not told us what it is like to be a bat (or a human being, or a zombie), so there!" But what it is like is an *experience* – which means that it makes no sense to ask how and why it is possible in any other senses but the ones just discussed. Of course an explanation isn't the same as an experience, but that's because the two are completely independent categories, like colors and triangles. It is obvious that I cannot experience what it is like to be you, but I can potentially have a complete explanation of how and why it is possible to be you. To ask for that explanation to also somehow encompass the experience itself is both incoherent, and an illegitimate use of the word 'explanation'.

At this point the gentle reader may smell echos of Daniel Dennett's or Patricia Churchland's 'deflationary' or 'eliminativist' responses to Chalmers & co. That, however, would be a mistake. Unlike Dennett, I don't think for a moment that consciousness is an 'illusion'; and unlike Churchland I reject the idea that we can (or that it would be useful to) do away with concepts such as consciousness, pain, and the like, replacing them with descriptions of neurobiological processes. On this I'm squarely with Searle when he said that "where consciousness is concerned, the existence of the appearance is the reality" (chew on that for a bit, if you

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don't mind).

Consciousness as we have been discussing it is a biological process, explained by neurobiological and other cognitive mechanisms, and whose *raison d'être* can in principle be accounted for on evolutionary grounds. To be sure, it is still largely mysterious, but (*contra* Dennett and Churchland) it is no mere illusion (it's too metabolically expensive, and it clearly does a lot of important cognitive work), and (*contra* Chalmers, Nagel, etc.) it does not represent a problem of principle for scientific naturalism.

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