

Introduction to the Hard Problem – Tim Bollands

The topic for this year's Members' Weekend is **The Hard Problem of Consciousness** – arguably the most important problem in the Philosophy of Mind. Philosopher David Chalmers believed that much philosophy of mind concerned what he considered to be the 'easy problems' of how the mind or brain functions, e.g. how we respond to stimuli, report on our mental states or control our body's behaviour. The really 'hard problem' was that of explaining both how and why such functioning is accompanied by a subjective phenomenal experience. As Chalmers said (1995):

“Why is it that when our cognitive systems [process] visual or auditory information, we have visual or auditory experience - the quality of deep blue or the sensation of middle C? How can we explain why there is something it is like to entertain a mental image, or to experience an emotion? It is widely agreed that experience arises from a physical basis, but we have no good explanation of why and how it so arises. Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? It seems objectively unreasonable that it should, and yet it does”

The Hard Problem comes at such questions from a physicalist perspective – the assumption that “experience arises from a physical basis”. This belief has been widely accepted by scientists and philosophers ever since Gilbert Ryle (1949) ridiculed Descartes' conception of the human mind as 'the Ghost in the Machine'. How could such a ghost have any influence on our behaviour, if the behaviour of every piece of matter in our bodies is governed by Laws of Physics? Clearly, Mind arises from Matter. The question we are still unable to answer is *how* it manages to do this.

For Chalmers, the Hard Problem was not simply that of *how* the brain creates consciousness; it was the question of *why*? Why should physical processing give rise to conscious experience, as opposed to, well, not giving rise to it? It is perfectly possible to conceive of human beings as super-evolved, biological machines, which receive and process information, create movement and speech, react to stimuli, etc. but *without any subjective experience whatsoever*. So, why is it that human beings do have subjective experience? Why are we not 'philosophical zombies', creatures that are physically and behaviourally indistinguishable from human beings, but with no inner life or phenomenal experience at all?

In a physical world, all material things, humans and zombies included, can be described in full in physical terms. And yet a human being is indistinguishable from its corresponding zombie, which means their physical descriptions are exactly the same. This makes our having of conscious experience a new fact, one that cannot be expressed using physical terminology. This led Chalmers (2002) to conclude the following:

“Consciousness fits uneasily into our conception of the natural world. On the most common conception of nature, the natural world is the physical world. But on the most common conception of consciousness, it is not easy to see how it could be part of the physical world. So, it seems that to find a place for consciousness within the natural order, we must either revise our conception of consciousness, or revise our conception of nature.”

Over this weekend, seven speakers will present their responses to the Hard Problem of Consciousness. They will offer answers to Chalmers' questions, seek to explain how Mind arises from Matter, or challenge Chalmers' view that consciousness has no place in a physical world. If we're lucky, they might even solve the Hard Problem itself, resolving once and for all the difficult questions of why consciousness exists and how our brains create it.

References:

Gilbert Ryle (1949), “Descartes Myth” in *The Concept of Mind*, Hutchinson, London

David Chalmers (1995), *Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness*, Journal of Consc. Studies

David Chalmers (2002), *Consciousness and its Place in Nature, Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, OUP