Consciousness I
A Hard Problem

Carlotta Pavese

11.19.13
Outline

1. Introduction
2. Consciousness & The Hard Problem
3. Chalmers’ Approach & Discussion
Outline

1. Introduction
2. Consciousness & The Hard Problem
3. Chalmers’ Approach & Discussion
David Chalmers
Cast of Characters

- Ph.D. Philosophy & Cognitive Science, Univ. of Indiana 1993
- Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Centre for Consciousness Studies at Australian National Univ., and Visiting Prof. at NYU
- Well-known for work on consciousness, AI & meaning
The Study of Mind

Historical Outline

1. Dualism: body & mind are distinct substances
The Study of Mind

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   - Descartes, Aristotle, Plato
The Study of Mind

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Functionalism: minds are what brains do
- Putnam, Fodor, Minsky, Smolensky
- Problem: ? (aside from embodiment)
The Study of Mind
One Thread of this Outline

- Descartes’ starting point: his own interior experience
The Study of Mind
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The Study of Mind
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The Study of Mind
One Thread of this Outline

- Descartes’ starting point: his own \textit{interior experience}
- Behaviorism banished the \textit{interior} from psychology
- Functionalism relaxes this
  - It talks freely in mental representations
- But has it relaxed it enough to capture what Descartes took as primary? Should it be so relaxed?
Descartes’ starting point: his own interior experience

Behaviorism banished the interior from psychology

Functionalism relaxes this
  - It talks freely in mental representations

But has it relaxed it enough to capture what Descartes took as primary? Should it be so relaxed?

What exactly did Descartes take as primary?
Descartes’ starting point: his own interior experience

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Functionalism relaxes this
  - It talks freely in mental representations

But has it relaxed it enough to capture what Descartes took as primary? Should it be so relaxed?

What exactly did Descartes take as primary?

Consciousness: first person experience
Example: William James (1842-1910)

Psychology must understand both the inner world of our conscious experience and the physiology that underlies it.
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The Study of Mind
What’s Been Left Out?

Example: William James (1842-1910)

Psychology must understand both the inner world of our conscious experience and the physiology that underlies it

1. Subjective (inner, personal) conscious experience
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- Descartes was concerned primarily with the first
  - We have said nothing about it!
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1. Subjective (inner, personal) conscious experience
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  - We have said nothing about it!
- “Behaviorism was a self-conscious revolution against consciousness” (David Cohen, Watson’s biographer)
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2. Consciousness & The Hard Problem
3. Chalmers’ Approach & Discussion
What is Consciousness?
Chalmers’ Poetry

On Consciousness (Chalmers 2010, p.3)
“Consciousness poses the most baffling problems in the science of the mind.

”
What is Consciousness?
Chalmers’ Poetry

On Consciousness (Chalmers 2010, p.3)

“Consciousness poses the most baffling problems in the science of the mind. There is nothing that we know more intimately than conscious experience, but there is nothing that is harder to explain.”
What is Consciousness?

Some Things are Not So Baffling or Hard to Explain

- The following are often associated with consciousness
What is Consciousness?
Some Things are Not So Baffling or Hard to Explain

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  - Ability to discriminate, categorize and react to stimuli
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- Chalmers: access consciousness is ‘easy’
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Ned Block: this is access consciousness
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The Easy Problem (Chalmers)
Access consciousness is not particularly baffling or hard to explain. Explaining it is the easy problem.
What is Consciousness?
More on the Easy Problem

Really, the easy problem is quite hard.
What is Consciousness?
More on the Easy Problem

- Really, the easy problem is quite hard
  - We still don’t understand these things
What is Consciousness?
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- For the Hard Problem this is not true
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What is Consciousness?

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- Nagel: there’s something it’s like to be a bat
- Until we’ve explained that, we’ve left something out
What is Consciousness?
The Hard Problem: what it’s like
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The Hard Problem: what it’s like

[Image of red Nike shoes]

Sounds, sights & their combinations too:
http://youtu.be/tPxgi-PiNFE
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What is Consciousness?
The Hard Problem is What it’s Like

- “In this central sense of ‘consciousness’, an organism is conscious if there is something it is like to be that organism.” (Chalmers p.5)
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Driving Home the Hard Problem

How can we explain what it is like and why there is something it is like to have a given experience?
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Driving Home the Hard Problem

How can we explain what it is like and why there is something it is like to have a given experience?

- Yes, it arises from physical processes
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- Why isn’t information processed ‘in the dark’?
The Hard Problem
Why is it So Hard?

Facing the Hard Problem (James Quoting Spencer)

“Suppose it to have become quite clear that a shock in consciousness and a molecular motion are the subjective and objective faces of the same thing; we continue utterly incapable of uniting the two, so as to conceive that reality of which they are the opposite faces.” (See Blackmore p.15)
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- There is an explanatory gap (Joseph Levine)
- “A metaphysical gap between physical phenomena and conscious experience.” (Levine)
The Hard Problem
The Explanatory Gap
The Hard Problem
Mechanism and Function

- So far we’ve explained mental phenomena by...
So far we’ve explained mental phenomena by understanding their function
The Hard Problem
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- Same for genes et. al. throughout high-level sciences
The Hard Problem
Mechanism and Function Fail

Mechanism, Function and Conscious Experience

“When it comes to conscious experience, this sort of explanation fails.
The Hard Problem
Mechanism and Function Fail

Mechanism, Function and Conscious Experience

“When it comes to conscious experience, this sort of explanation fails. What makes the hard problem hard and almost unique is that it goes beyond problems about the performance of functions.” (Chalmers p.8)
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- Imagine we have a full account of color vision in terms of its function and the mechanisms involved
- This still seems to leave open the question of what it’s like to see color in that way and why it looks that way
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- Imagine we have a full account of color vision in terms of its function and the mechanisms involved.
- This still seems to leave open the question of what it’s like to see color in that way and why it looks that way.
- “To explain experience, we need a new approach. The usual explanatory methods of cognitive science and neuroscience do not suffice.” (Chalmers p.9)
The Hard Problem
Dramatizing it with Jackson’s Thought Experiment

Jackson’s Thought Experiment: Mary and B&W room
The Hard Problem
Dramatizing it with Chalmers’ Zombies

“A zombie is just something physically identical to me, but which has no conscious experience – all is dark inside” (Chalmers *The Conscious Mind* p.96)
The Hard Problem
How Not to Solve It

Chalmers surveys several recent accounts of consciousness developed by philosophers, psychologists and cognitive scientists.
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Once they’ve described the mind, there will still be an open question about experience
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Experience is a fundamental, irreducible part of reality
Chalmers’ Positive Theory
A Science of Consciousness

- Experience is a fundamental, irreducible part of reality
- It’s not made up of anything else
**Chalmers’ Positive Theory**

A Science of Consciousness

- Experience is a fundamental, irreducible part of reality
  - It’s not made up of anything else
  - Like mass, charge, space & time
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**Chalmers’ Positive Theory**

* A Science of Consciousness

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He goes on to propose three laws (next class)
Critical Reactions

Dennett

Dennett: Vitalism and Illusion

- There's only access consciousness
Critical Reactions

Dennett

Dennett: Vitalism and Illusion

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- Chalmers’ ‘Hard Problem’ is a theorist’s illusion.
Critical Reactions
Dennett

Dennett: Vitalism and Illusion

- There's only access consciousness
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- It's not that it doesn't seem like there is conscious experience over and above access consciousness.
Dennett: Vitalism and Illusion

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- Compare vitalism prior to biochemistry
Chalmers’ Fires Back

Dear Mr. Dennett

- Imagine just how grand an illusion it would be if conscious experience didn’t really exist
Chalmers’ Fires Back

Dear Mr. Dennett

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Imagine just how grand an illusion it would be if conscious experience didn’t really exist.

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Again, there’s nothing that we seem more intimately familiar with than what it feels like to be us.
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- So we should only accept this theory if given very strong arguments for it
- This requires demonstrating it to be an illusion and saying how we get tricked
- Dennett has done neither
Consciousness

Summary

Access consciousness is our ability to discriminate stimuli, self-monitor, focus attention, etc.
Consciousness

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1. Access consciousness is our ability to discriminate stimuli, self-monitor, focus attention, etc.
2. There are many interesting but tractable problems about how this works.

Either this is an illusion (Dennett, Others)
Or we need a view of the universe that makes room for experience as fundamental (Chalmers)
Consciousness

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