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The Hard Problem of Consciousness: An Insoluble Problem

Have you ever thought to ask yourself “what is consciousness?” or “why am I conscious?” Although we all have personal and intimate experience with our consciousness, this question is one of the *great scientific mysteries of our time*. Firstly, what do we mean when we say “consciousness?” Consciousness is awareness and experience. Right now, you are aware of the fact that you’re in a room and reading these words and understanding their meaning... and voila, you’re *conscious*! While the cognitive sciences, like cognitive psychology and neuroscience, have made great progress towards understanding the correlations between the brain and our conscious states, we still have no idea how a completely *physical* state, like the movements of neurons in the brain, could lead to entirely *non-physical qualitative states*, like consciousness and experience. This mystery is known as “The Hard Problem of Consciousness.”

Philosopher David Chalmers introduced the Hard Problem in the paper titled “Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness,” when he realized that no matter how much we know about the physical state of the brain, that physical information can not, in principle, explain *why* there is awareness or experience associated with it (Chalmers). Surely, he thought, this state (of consciousness) could be wholly described *without* there being any state of experience or awareness attached to it.

The modern Western, scientific metaphysical understanding of the universe is called “Materialism” and/or “Physicalism,” which is the idea that everything in the universe has its origin in something physical, something non-conscious. In the current scientific establishment, due to cultural conditioning, Materialism is taken for granted. The previously mentioned Hard Problem, however, offers a great challenge to the materialist. As such, the Hard Problem of Consciousness is an insoluble problem under modern, scientific Materialism and needs to be approached from an alternate metaphysical perspective.

Before addressing the empirical evidence against the materialist worldview, it is important to address the absurdity of the materialist perspective from a purely rational and logical vantage point. The materialist worldview is something that has become so firmly ingrained in our society that most people - including myself up until a few years ago - have never even thought to question it. Now, I invite you to do just that.

Imagine eating some of your favorite food or listening to your favorite song. Bring yourself into that experience and feel it. Well, from the materialist perspective, everything attached to that experience is entirely explainable *quantitatively*, from things like decibels, wavelengths, and mass. That is all that is it. While it is logical to use these quantities as *descriptions* of the experiences we have, like decibels as *descriptions* of sound or pounds as *descriptions* of mass, the next step that the materialist takes is where the absurdity begins. As Bernardo Kastrup puts it, the materialist then takes the “descriptions for the thing described, the map for the territory” (Kastrup 9). This goes

against our normal and inherent intuitions of the world around us. Your favorite song, surely, has a certain “quality” to it that *can not* be described solely from decibels, wavelengths, and vibrating eardrums. Something is missing from that description of quantities... the song itself!

To understand this further, and to grasp the absurdity of it, take the famous thought experiment by philosopher Frank Jackson, known as the knowledge argument or “Mary’s Room.” Imagine someone, named Mary, who is the world’s foremost expert on color. Mary knows *everything* there is to know about color. She knows about wavelength, light, reflection, etc, and has studied it for decades. She knows *all* of the quantitative ways in which science understands color. However, there is one unique thing about her: Mary has a special kind of colorblindness and sees the world in only black and white. Everything she has ever seen was in black and white. One day, as she is walking through a dense Colorado forest, during the peak of the Fall season, she suddenly gains normal color vision. After seeing the vibrant yellows, reds, and oranges of the trees and the bright greens of the grass, Mary realizes, in an instant, that she did not understand color *at all*. Once she actually *experienced* color, she surely learned something new! How is this possible? She knew everything about color, right? Wrong. She knew everything about how we *describe* color, not what color actually *is* experientially.

One could imagine the same revelation would be made by a deaf expert in sound who suddenly hears his first Beethoven Concerto. Upon hearing for the first time, he realizes that the sheet music was an incomplete description of the music. Imagine an

expert in taste with anosmia (the inability to taste) who suddenly tastes his first delicious meal, cooked up by Bobby Flay. To grasp this thought experiment is to grasp the absurdity of the materialist position; that the *qualities* of experience, like the redness of red, are entirely derivable from quantitative descriptions, such as mass, charge, and wavelengths. As Kastrup put it, to do this is to mistake “the map from the territory” (Kastrup 9). In this sense, the materialists believe that one day we could somehow pull the world out of Google Earth. This is nonsense.

Now that the absurdity of the materialist perspective has been addressed, let’s look at the empirical evidence that demonstrates why “The Hard Problem” is an insoluble problem under modern, metaphysical Materialism. The first few pieces of evidence addressed can be thought of as “black swans” in a “white swan hypothesis.” If you have a hypothesis that states “there are only white swans” but then proceed to find a black swan, then your hypothesis is no longer tenable. The white swan, according to neuroscience, is that the brain *generates*, or better yet, *is* consciousness. However, new neuroimaging studies of the state induced by psychedelics, like psilocybin (magic mushrooms), LSD, and ayahuasca show exactly the opposite.

A study conducted by pioneer researcher RR Griffiths titled “Mystical-Type Experiences Occasioned by Psilocybin Mediate the Attribution of Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance 14 Months Later” shows that Psilocybin leads to some of the most significant experiences anyone can ever undergo (Griffiths et al). Therefore, what these studies show is that the most significant, meaningful, and hyperreal experiences that we

are capable of undertaking, which are the states induced by psychedelics, actually correlate with *reduced* brain activity. You read that right: *reduced brain activity* correlates with *hyper-real* experience. Surely, reduced brain activity, if the brain is what generates consciousness, would lead to reduced conscious experience. A 2016 study, titled “Neural Correlates of the LSD Experience Revealed by Multimodal Neuroimaging” show that “there are significant reductions in alpha-brain activity...” in the brain (Carhart-Harris et al). Another recent study, published in 2015 titled “The Psychedelic State Induced by Ayahuasca Modulates the Activity and Connectivity of the Default Mode Network” showed similar findings with the psychedelic ayahuasca (Palhano-Fontes).

To reiterate: the brain, under modern Materialism, is hypothesized to generate consciousness. To understand why these psychedelic neuroimaging studies prove difficult for the materialist, take another thought experiment. Imagine that the brain is like the ocean and the materialist believes consciousness is generated by the movement of the waves in that ocean. In this thought experiment, scientists see correlations between the two events and come up with this hypothesis “the waves generate the consciousness”. However, new studies start popping up that prove when the ocean is still, with fewer waves than normal, the ocean is actually producing its most intense, meaningful, and coherent conscious experience. Surely, in this instance, we would need to rethink our theories of oceans-waves-consciousness; in the same way, these psychedelic neuroimaging challenge the orthodoxy and show that we need to rethink our brain-consciousness hypothesis.

The next piece of evidence that challenges the current model of consciousness stems from recent Near Death Experience studies. Near Death Experiences (NDEs) are experiences that happen in states where a person is thought to be either dead, near-dead, or inside of a deep coma. In short, their brain stops functioning. In a recent interview with brain surgeon Sam Parnia, Robert Kuhn questions him about research in Near Death Experiences. Parnia discusses the fact that the current evidence shows that “consciousness does not become annihilated just after a person has died” (“Sam Parnia - Is Life”). While Parnia’s claims and the research at hand are subject to debate (due to the dogmatic materialist bias), they lend strong evidence to the notion that consciousness does not come from the brain. We have evidence that a person's personal consciousness continues immediately after death, with no brain function whatsoever (“Sam Parnia - Is Life”). While this fact does not prove anything about consciousness itself, it does point to the fact that consciousness can not plausibly come from the brain.

Before addressing more of the evidence against the materialist position, it is important to address some of the current counterarguments against my reasoning. As one might imagine, many people are still defending Materialism, even in light of all the evidence to the contrary. One important and strong argument that I want to address is a general argument that the materialist presents. The argument can be summed up by world renowned neurophilosopher Patricia Churchland, where she states that “The history of science is *full* of cases where people thought a phenomenon was *utterly* unique, that there couldn’t be any *possible* mechanism for it, that we might *never* solve it, that there was

nothing in the universe like it... The history of science really gives you perspective on how easy it is to talk ourselves into this sort of thinking – that if my big, wonderful brain can't envisage the solution, then it must be a really, really hard problem" (Burkeman). Thinkers like Churchland believe that since we have so many correlations between brain activity and conscious states, it would be insane to drop Materialism (which has been very successful at generating new technology and new scientific discoveries) on the basis of the Hard Problem and the claims of a few fringe neuroscientists, physicists, and philosophers.

This line of argumentation does have some merit. Churchland is right. In the past, science has been unable to explain things and when the traditional orthodoxy of the time could not explain it, we came up with alternative explanations, appeals to magic, that later turned out to be incorrect. What happened was that we just did not have the proper technology or scientific understanding to solve the problem. This is fair enough. However, the problem with this line of reasoning is that it commits an appeal to ignorance fallacy. I could make the same argument, from historical ignorance, that in the past we believed the earth to be flat, the majority of scientists believed it to be flat, and to say otherwise was blasphemy! In the past, we believed all sorts of outrageous things, and maybe the idea that the brain generates consciousness is one of these outrageous things as well.

Another problem with this line of reasoning is that the evidence presented, so as to not dismiss the hypothesis, is wrapped in another logical fallacy: the questionable-cause

fallacy. This is more commonly understood as “correlation does not imply causation.”

Although millions of people waking up every morning correlate with the rising sun, this does not mean that people waking up *cause* the sun to rise. In this instance, the causation is the other way around: people wake up because the sun is rising. Another famous example of questionable cause is that as purchases of ice cream increase, so do murder rates. However, in this instance, there is no causation whatsoever and it is just a coincidence stemming from other factors. Since the majority of evidence used to defend the brain-consciousness hypothesis is wrapped in questionable-cause, this line of argumentation, again, fails to discredit the aforementioned reasoning. One could just as easily argue that consciousness causes the brain since there are correlations between the two.

Another critique, although a bit less common, is of the consciousness itself. Philosopher Daniel Dennett is most famous for this critique, claiming that the hard problem is not a real problem because consciousness is just “the brain's 'user illusion' of itself” (Buckley). To Dennett, the qualitative states that we experience, from love to the taste of chocolate, are just illusions that the brain tells itself. If they are just illusions, then the Hard Problem does not exist. These “experiences” are just tricks of the mind and do not exist.

There are many problems with this line of argumentation. Dennett, among others, fails to see how incredibly fallacious this argument is, as it is fundamentally an argument from ignorance and an appeal to magic. To make this argument is to say “well, we can’t

explain it, so it must just be an illusion. Voila! Problem solved.” As Kastrup has put it in his interview with Curt Jaimungal, claiming consciousness is an illusion is no different from saying “consciousness is the involuntary wiggling of my left big toe... it’s completely arbitrary” (“Bernardo Kastrup on Analytical Idealism”). It says nothing about consciousness, the brain, or experience, and is a complete cop-out to describe something that we intimately know... our experience! This explanation is a desperate attempt by Dennett to get rid of the Hard Problem. Sadly, Dennett is committing the exact fallacy that Churchland described: appealing to magic when science can not come up with the solution. The materialists do not even see their own contradictions!

In addition to its fallacious foundation, this argument contradicts every single aspect of how we understand the world. While you can typically say something is true just because it aligns with our experience, like saying that “the earth is flat because it looks flat to the naked eye,” consciousness is a special exception. Not only does my intuition seem to indicate that my experience is real, literally *everything single thing* that I’ve ever known, experienced, felt, seen, heard, tasted, etc, has been known only because of consciousness. Maybe an illusion can trick someone into thinking that something is far away when it is close or trick someone into thinking something is hot when it’s not. However, to dismiss consciousness, the only thing we can ever be certain of, as an illusion is fallacious at best and madness at worst.

In contrast to these objections, there is even more evidence that the Hard Problem is an insoluble problem under Materialism. Work done by cognitive psychologist Donald

Hoffman and mathematician Chetan Prakash is now showing that there is zero percent chance we see the world as it actually is because “[evolution] maximizes evolutionary fitness by driving truth to extinction” (Gefter). What does this mean? Hoffman and Prakash have proven, through a mathematical theorem of Evolution by Natural Selection, that we do not see the objective world through our sense perception. Instead, what we see can be likened to a computer desktop interface (Gefter).

When you grab a file on your computer, one that is blue and rectangular, and drag it into the trash can, you know you did not *literally* drag an actual blue file into a real trash can. No, these things are just the desktop representation of processes happening inside of the computer's hardware to help the user of the computer use the computer. Hoffman and Prakash are showing that the same thing, more or less, is happening with our perception (Gefter). The “objective world” as we know it is just the “desktop” representation of something deeper.

If this is the case, then why are we so good at existing in the world? Well, imagine trying to win at a very difficult video game on your computer. Would it be better to have knowledge of the chips in the hardware and interact with the game through the chips/hardware, or instead be really good at the user-interface of the game? It is obviously the latter, and this is what evolution has given us. In this sense, the brain, and everything we interact with in the world are not actually what we think they are. The brain, like everything else, is just a *representation* that evolution has given us.

Due to the work of Hoffman and Prakash, the idea that we can't pull the objective world out of our senses (territory from the map) does not only align with our intuitions; now, we know for a fact that we see is just a map, a "desktop interface" and *not* the objective world, and therefore trying to pull consciousness out of the brain, which is just a representation of something deeper, is a lost cause. While Hoffman's theorem does not say anything about consciousness, Hoffman himself believes that the true, "deeper" reality is a network of consciousness (Gefter). The idea that consciousness is fundamental led Hoffman to his research on perception/evolution and his groundbreaking new theorem. If ideas that could help us solve the Hard Problem, like consciousness as fundamental, lead to revolutionary new mathematical theorems and discoveries, then it becomes easier to argue that we are finally on the right track. To reiterate, the materialist brain-consciousness hypothesis has not, in many decades, moved us any closer to solving the Hard Problem. But, in contrast, when a cognitive scientist with a "fringe" idea, like that consciousness is fundamental, starts studying it, he discovers a revolutionary theorem of Evolution. Coincidence? Maybe, maybe not.

Further evidence that rejects Materialism comes from the world of physics and quantum mechanics. While this is probably the most contentious piece of evidence being presented to refute Materialism, it is nonetheless very thought-provoking and important to discuss. Quantum Mechanics, the field of physics that deals with the smallest aspects of the universe, has shown that the material universe, as we know it, has "no standalone existence and is a superficial image of an observer" ("Is matter but a superficial

appearance?”). Imagine that a quantum particle, until observed, exists simultaneously as a probability of two states, up and down. Until I *observe* it, it exists as both up and down and when I observe it, it will “collapse” into up *or* down.

Now, this fact alone does not prove that the universe has no standalone existence. However, physicists have discovered that you can “entangle” two particles so that their states are corresponding. When I look at one of them, and it goes “up,” then the other entangled one will automatically go “down.” The interesting thing about two entangled particles is that if I observe one particle and it goes up, then it’s the corresponding particle, which could be on the *other side of the universe*, will correspond to down *instantaneously*, at faster than the speed of light. By all of our materialist intuitions, two things that are completely and utterly isolated from one another, like particles on opposite ends of the universe, should not be able to influence one another (Is matter but a superficial appearance?) right?

This discovery is not new, so why has science not accepted that the world is not fundamentally material? Well, physicists have attempted to reconcile this by hypothesizing that there are an infinite amount of universes coming into existence every fraction of a second from every point in the universe, called the “Many Worlds Interpretation” of Quantum Mechanics. Unfortunately, as cool of an idea as it is, there is no evidence for it. It seems to be a last-ditch effort by the physicists to save materialism, and many physicists are finally admitting defeat, accepting that we will need to rethink our metaphysical underpinnings.

Given all of this evidence, maybe you are convinced and maybe you are not.

However, at this point, you might be wondering something: why is this important? Why should you care? Well, this is extremely important, as many of the problems in today's society can be linked to a materialist underpinning. If *everything* that exists is random and derived from dead matter, then our lives, by definition, have no meaning or purpose. Without any meaning, what is the point of living? According to a 2022 article, there has been a drastic rise in depression, suicidal ideation, and anxiety in the US ("The State of Mental Health in America"). The rise of these problems could be directly linked to a "rise in nihilism" and meaninglessness (Routledge). Nihilism is the idea or philosophy that "nothing matters," and it is especially prevalent among the younger generations. In a meaningless universe, it becomes much easier to tolerate and accept the horrific things that plague our society: from war and school shootings to rape and slavery. Through a different worldview, one embedded with meaning and one where we understand that we are all *fundamentally connected*, not only might we resolve the "Hard Problem of Consciousness," but we might change the world.

What is this different worldview? This different worldview is called "Idealism," and it is the metaphysical opposite of Materialism. A truly materialistic universe would entail that it, and everything in it, is fundamentally matter, or physical stuff. In contrast, an idealistic universe would mean that it, and everything in it, is fundamentally *consciousness*. While this might sound a little crazy, there are many reasons to give it a chance. For one, Idealism is much more parsimonious with our actual experience of the

world than Materialism. Nobody could ever or will ever experience the world without consciousness; without it, we would be like zombies, aimlessly wandering around as unconscious slaves to our biology. Secondly, it has just as much explanatory power as Materialism, meaning that not only can we explain everything that science has accepted up until this point, from anthropology to physics to biology, but we can also solve the Hard Problem and all of mysteries within “fringe” sciences. Take parapsychological research, for example, that has proven the existence of phenomena such as precognition, which is the ability for people to predict future events. Parapsychological research that has been peer-reviewed and shown statistical significance is routinely mocked and ignored in the mainstream because there is not a materialistic theory that could explain any of these phenomena. Lastly, and most importantly, Idealism gives the world meaning.

How does Idealism give the world, and the people living in it, meaning? Well, if Idealism is true, it means that we are all fundamentally One. Although there is apparent separation and divide, this divide is, as the Hindus would put it, *Maya*. *Maya* can be roughly translated to “Divine Illusion” or “Divine Magic.” The separation and divide that seemingly exists between us is just an illusion, and at the deepest and most fundamental level, we are all One, individuations of a Universal Consciousness.

Given all of the evidence, from psychedelic neuroimaging, Near Death Experiences, theorems of evolution, and even quantum physics, it is time that we begin to rethink our metaphysical understanding of the world. If we ever want to solve the Hard Problem, this is a must. Although Materialism has led us to amazing technological advancements, it has

also led us down a path of nihilism, meaninglessness, and disconnectedness. The Hard Problem of Consciousness is an insoluble problem under modern, scientific materialism, and needs to be approached from a different metaphysical understanding, such as Idealism, in which we understand ourselves and the world to be derived from Consciousness itself.

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