Lecture 1: Setting up the Problem of Consciousness

I. Honing in on the Phenomenon of Consciousness

Intuitive Motivation
Suppose you have just had a dental procedure under general anesthetic and are coming round. You are aware of a dazzling light above you and of a muffled voice echoing in your ears. There is sickness in your stomach and a sharp metallic taste in your mouth. You feel a moment of panic as you struggle to work out what happened. Moving your head, you recognize the dentist’s face and realize that he is speaking your name and asking if you want a glass of water. You remember where you are, sit up shakily and take the glass. (Frankish, Consciousness)

What happened as you regained consciousness?
• Various body processes resumed: sense organs started functioning again,
• Brain processing started up.
But in addition you started to have conscious experiences – experiences with a certain feel to them.

Different term to refer to this aspect of experiences: qualitative feel phenomenal feel, phenomenology, subjective character, ‘what-it’s-like’, ‘qualia’, etc.

When we talk about consciousness, we are not interested in the nature of perceptions, sensations and thoughts as such but rather on what is special about those perceptions, sensations, and thoughts that have a feel to them.

II. Some Useful Distinctions
We need to distinguish consciousness from some related phenomena.

Creature Consciousness: When we say that we are conscious, we mean that we are awake, as opposed to being asleep or knocked out. This is creature consciousness.

State Consciousness: When we say that an experience is conscious, we mean that they are of the sort that have a phenomenal character to them. This is state consciousness.

According to Ned Block, we also need to distinguish two kinds of state consciousness:

Phenomenal Consciousness: A mental state is phenomenally conscious if it has a phenomenal character.

Access-consciousness: A mental state is access-conscious if the information it carries is directly available to other mental processes, including reasoning, behavioral control and speech.

II. The Elusiveness of Consciousness

Ineffability
It is very hard to describe an experience in a way that really conveys what it is like and that would be informative to someone who had never had it. We do not have distinctive words for phenomenal properties themselves.

Arbitrariness
The second reason is that phenomenal character seems arbitrary: the connection between what an experience is of and the way it feels seems arbitrary. Why does a tomato produce a ‘reddish’ sensation rather than a ‘greenish’ one?

III. The Problem of Consciousness

The Easy and the Hard Problem
Recall functionalism: according to functionalism mental states and processes can be defined functionally, in terms of the causal role they play in the operation of the mind.

Functionalism can explain many types of consciousness. According to Chalmers, it can explain:
the ability to discriminate, categorize, and react to environmental stimuli
the integration of information by a cognitive system
the reportability of mental states
the ability of a system to access its own internal states
the focus of attention
deliberate control of behavior
the difference between wakefulness and sleep

But can it explain phenomenal consciousness? Here’s a reason to be skeptical: functionalism characterizes mental states by what they do, rather than by how they feel. And it seems that a brain state could play the functional role of an experience without having any phenomenal character to it.

Why are the easy problems easy, and why is the hard problem hard? The easy problems are easy precisely because they concern the explanation of cognitive abilities and functions. To explain a cognitive function, we need only specify a mechanism that can perform the function. The methods of cognitive science are well-suited for this sort of explanation, and so are well-suited to the easy problems of consciousness. By contrast, the hard problem is hard precisely because it is not a problem about the performance of functions. The problem persists even when the performance of all the relevant functions is explained. [...] How do we explain the performance of a function? By specifying a mechanism that performs the function. Here, neurophysiological and cognitive modeling are perfect for the task. If we want a detailed low-level explanation, we can specify the neural mechanism that is responsible for the function. If we want a more abstract explanation, we can specify a mechanism in computational terms. (Chalmers, 1995)

The Explanatory Problem
The challenge here is an explanatory one: how to explain how consciousness arises out of brain cells.

We can explain a television’s ability to to display moving images of distant events by providing information about optics, electricity, radio waves, light, etc. We can show that this property follows from more basic, lower-level properties of the television, i.e. its possession of various mechanical and electronic components. These properties explain the television’s power to display moving images of distant events because it’s clear that they are sufficient for it. Nothing more is needed. The television possesses the higher-level properties in virtue of the lower-level ones.

How is it possible for conscious states to depend upon brain states? How can technicolor phenomenology arise from soggy grey matter? What makes the bodily organ we call the brain so radically different from other bodily organs, say the kidneys – the body parts without a trace of consciousness? How could the aggregation of millions of individually insentient neurons generate subjective awareness? We know that brains are the de facto causal basis of consciousness, but we have, it seems, no understanding whatever of how this can be so. It strikes us as miraculous, eerie, even faintly comic. Somehow, we feel, the water of the physical brain is turned into the wine of consciousness, but we draw a total blank on the nature of this conversion. Neural transmissions just seem like the wrong kind of materials with which to bring consciousness into the world, but it appears that in some way they perform this mysterious feat. The mind-body problem is the problem of understanding how the miracle is wrought, thus removing the sense of deep mystery. We want to take the magic out of the link between consciousness and the brain. (McGinn 1984, 349)

The Hard Problem as a Metaphysical Problem
I have characterized the hard problem as an explanatory problem. But it can also be characterized as a metaphysical problem: the problem of saying what kind of phenomenon consciousness is and whether it is a physical one.

How does the metaphysical problem link up with the explanatory one?
• High-level properties can be explained in terms of basic physical properties only if high-level properties are not fundamentally distinct from physical properties.
If high-level properties are distinct from basic physical properties, then it will not be possible to explain them in basic physical terms.

Most people nowadays accept substance physicalism: the claim that everything in the universe is composed wholly of the basic entities and forces postulated by modern physics.

But what about the properties of things? Take the properties of being alive, having a heart, having a headache, etc. These are high-level properties. They contrast with basic physical properties such as having a certain mass, charge, etc. How do high-level and low-level properties relate?

According to property physicalism, high-level properties are not fundamentally distinct from basic physical ones. Once God fixed the basic physical facts, she fixed all the facts; there was no more work for her to do. (Kripke 1980)

According to property dualism, some high-level properties are fundamentally distinct from basic physical properties. They are additional features of the world.

What is the function of consciousness?
If Cog could perform almost any task as well as us without being conscious, why would evolution equip us with consciousness? What survival advantage does phenomenal consciousness confer?

IV. Preview
This lecture we have clarified the problem that consciousness poses. In the remaining lectures we will explore some responses. We will explore three aspects:
1. We will look at the extent to which consciousness poses a challenge to physicalism. Can there be a science of consciousness? Or are we have to embrace property-dualism?
2. We will look at a particular physicalism approach to give a reductive explanation of consciousness: representationalism.
3. We will look at whether we need to revise the way in which we pose the problem of consciousness.

V. Readings


