

Why the Hard Problem is Hard

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Shrii P.R. Sarkar described consciousness as the supreme subject. That is, consciousness observes objects, but no object can observe consciousness. And it is “subtler than the subtlest objects of the universe” – as far removed as possible from physical matter.

Mainstream scientists, on the other hand, are almost completely committed to the idea that nothing exists except physical matter. So they are convinced that consciousness must also be a form of physical matter – no doubt the physical matter of the brain. Many of them expect that an accepted explanation of consciousness as a function of the physical brain will be arrived at within a reasonable time. One physicist predicted to me that it would be fifty years.

Yet there are a few scientists who, while they are committed to the idea that consciousness must be a function of the brain, think that an *explanation* may not be so easy; or even think that it may remain forever impossible. At a time when science seems to be solving the deepest mysteries of the universe at such a rapid rate, why should explaining consciousness be so difficult? Philosopher David Chalmers coined the expression “the hard problem of consciousness”. By this he meant that to explain how the brain remembers, or how it focuses attention, for instance, while not easy problems, will be relatively easy. But to explain why we not only perform such mental activity, but why we are aware of it, or aware of anything – why and how we have inner *experience* – is a hard problem.

Neuroscientist Sam Harris is one who shares Chalmers’s idea that the problem is hard:

*I am sympathetic with those who . . . have suggested that perhaps the emergence of consciousness is simply incomprehensible in human terms.*¹

Here I will explain *why* I think it is that, even if consciousness were just a function of the brain, it would be difficult ever to explain it.

Science approaches everything in the universe from an objective perspective. It studies things from outside the things. And normally our subjective experience uses the same perspective that science does (sometimes taking the help of science) – we experience things that seem to be outside of us. When we think about our own brain cells, the cells seem to be outside the thinker, though presumably brain cells are doing the thinking.

When I observe that a hammer (more precisely called a gong striker) striking a gong produces sound, and I make measurements and develop a theory, the hammer is an object of my consciousness, the gong is an object of my consciousness, the sound is an object of my consciousness – and the air

¹ Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion* (Simon & Schuster, 2014), hardcover p. 57.

which I may work into my theory is an object of my consciousness. The same is true when I make observations and measurements of natural events involving objects that can be observed only with sophisticated equipment. Thus the same is true when I make observations and measurements of the neurons of mine out of which my consciousness is often theorized to emerge: when I observe those neurons, they are objects of my consciousness.

I know that consciousness exists, and know whatever I know about its nature, only because I know that I am observing objective things (such as hammers and gongs and sounds and microscopic objects, including neurons) – and observing my thoughts, which are also objective to my consciousness. I know that I am observing and thereby infer that I am observing *with* something, which I call consciousness, but I don't observe my consciousness. Consciousness is the only thing that is completely subjective and is not an object of my consciousness (though my thoughts and theories about it are certainly objects of my consciousness).

So when I observe and measure a hammer and gong producing *sound*, I am observing and measuring an interaction among different things all of which are objective to my consciousness. But when I try to observe and measure neuronal activity producing *consciousness* – assuming that it does – I am trying to observe and measure the production, from something that is objective to my consciousness, of something that, since it is my only means of observing *with* and I have no other equipment for observing *with*, I *cannot* observe from the outside.

Ah, but I should be able to observe someone *else's* consciousness from the outside, right? Well, if consciousness is a pattern of brain activity, then you can observe that brain activity as it produces consciousness – subjective experience – for that person, but it is in fact producing a subjective experience belonging to *that* person only, not to you. So you cannot confirm that the brain activity is in fact producing the experience, or even that the person necessarily has any subjective experience.

Since I can observe hammer, gong, air and sound, once I develop a theory of how sound is produced by hammer, gong, and air, I have a chance of confirming the theory very reliably by observing all of those "players" (the players when sound is produced).

"I can observe": all the players are observable in my subjective experience, if not directly, then through instruments.

But once I develop a theory (however correct and precise the theory may be) of how consciousness is produced by neuronal activity, I don't have a chance of confirming the theory reliably because there is one of the "players," when consciousness is produced, that is not observable by me, much less by anyone else. **One of the players is not observable in my subjective experience.** All the objects and activities that generate consciousness may be observable, but the observer is not observable. If consciousness occurs simultaneously with the proposed neuronal activity, that would be partial confirmation, but only partial. And as of today we don't really know that consciousness is absent when one is deep asleep, so we don't completely know when it is present and when not.

Moreover, even if simultaneity is considered adequate scientific evidence of cause in some other situations, I think that because consciousness is completely subjective (unlike sound, for instance – either sound as air waves or the sound that we are conscious of in our minds), we hold a higher standard of proof for any theory of consciousness than we do in those other situations. Maybe this demand is only a psychological foible of ours, maybe not. We are asking, how can those neurons – which, as we perceive them, are just as much objects of our consciousness as are skin cells or for that matter gravel on a road – or any physical effect created by those neurons – perform such a staggering flip and become *us* looking at the neurons and skin cells and gravel?² Thus to be convinced of the theory, I in my subjective experience would have to observe those brain events actually giving rise to something that I cannot observe (my consciousness). This is not possible. In other words, for me to feel convinced, I would need more than just simultaneity; **all the players would have to be observable in my subjective experience**; yet one is not.

Since a neuron can act like a tiny computer processor, and since each of us may have 100 billion neurons, each interconnecting with multiple other neurons, it is understandable how those prosaic neurons might generate much intelligence. But consciousness, the witness of intelligence, is qualitatively different from intelligence. You can appreciate this by reflecting that computers, to be intelligent, don't have to be aware of their thinking. Their programming did not include awareness, and we assume they are not aware. Now think of your friend. You know that he or she is intelligent, to whatever extent they may be intelligent. But no matter what genius you know them to possess, you don't really know that they are conscious. They could be a robot, that is, a computer. They could be a zombie. As Harris has written, "Nothing about a brain, when surveyed as a physical system, suggests that it is a locus of experience. Were we not already brimming with consciousness ourselves, we would find no evidence for it anywhere in the universe . . ."³

Physicist James Trefil: . . . *it is the only major question in the sciences that we don't even know how to ask.*⁴

Neuroscientist Sam Harris in a [podcast](#): *That may be fundamentally mysterious and . . . it [would] remain mysterious even if we knew the answer. It's almost like we're not cognitively equipped to make sense of the answer.*

² ". . . there is nothing about a brain, studied at any scale, that even suggests that it might harbor consciousness – apart from the fact that we experience consciousness directly and have correlated many of its contents, or lack thereof, with processes in our brains." Ibid., p. 60.

³ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴ James Trefil, *101 Things You Don't Know about Science and No One Else Does Either* (Houghton Mifflin, 1996), p. 15.

Sam Harris, *Waking Up: Consciousness may very well be the lawful product of unconscious information processing. But I don't know what that sentence actually means – and I don't think anyone else does either. This situation has been characterized as an “explanatory gap” and as the “hard problem of consciousness”, and it is surely both.*⁵

Sam Harris, *Waking Up: . . . if an adequate, non-circular definition of consciousness exists, no one has found it.*⁶

Neuroscientist Susan Greenfield in [a video](#): . . . *this is what . . . keeps me awake at night: What kind of answer would answer the question? If someone said to me they've solved how the brain [translates into?] consciousness, what would I expect to see, performing rats, or a brain image, or a formula? No, no, no, and no. Until we even know what kind of question, kind of answer, that we're after, we can't get there.*

I think that one reason this keeps her awake is that, due to the subjectivity of consciousness, even if the correct answer really is something so simple as a brain scan, that answer, though correct, will never be completely convincing to her or anyone unless they can experience it subjectively, that is, unless **all the players are observable in their subjective experience** – an impossibility, as explained above. (At least it is an impossibility if consciousness is a form of physical matter.)

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⁵ Sam Harris, op. cit., p. 56.

⁶ Sam Harris, op. cit., p. 56.