**Greater Manchester Humanists**

**Humanist Discussion Group**

**26 October 2021**

**(Zoom meeting 7.30-9.00pm)**

**Consciousness Explained**

**Introduction**

The origin of consciousness is often described as the greatest mystery in the universe. It is the ‘Hard Problem’. In these notes we will define consciousness for the purposes of our discussion, describe the ‘Hard Problem’ and then look at the three dominant approaches to explaining consciousness. It will become apparent that the ‘Hard Problem’ may not exist at all. It may be yet another example of human arrogance.

Which approach seems most plausible to you?

**Definition of Consciousness**For the purposes of this discussion, we will define consciousness as:

‘The appearance of a world and the experience of what it is like to be in that world’

Note that this includes subjective experiences: ‘Qualia’ – for example what it feels like to see the colour of the blue sky.

**The Hard Problem**

The term ‘Hard Problem’ was coined by the Philosopher David Chalmers. It can be defined as follows:

While we can describe physical processes in the brain (the ‘easy problem’) why do these give rise to subjective experience, why don’t they just go on in the dark? This gives rise to the idea of **philosophical zombies** who would behave in a manner indistinguishable from us but have no internal subjective experience. To hear David Chalmers describe the problem please watch:

[Hard Problem of Consciousness — David Chalmers - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5DfnIjZPGw)

**The Three Approaches to the Problem**

**Mysterianism**

Mysterians (this includes most religious people) take the view that consciousness represents something separate to the brain. They are mind-body dualists. This can take many forms (basically anything you want to make up) including, for example, panpsychism where everything in the universe (even my computer, in fact every atom) has some degree of consciousness. It is therefore outside the realm of science. Critics of this approach draw analogies with the now debunked belief that living things need a mysterious ‘life force’ and remind us that there is no mechanism for this immaterial substance to interact with the brain. For a critique of the Mysterians see this interview given by Andy Clarke, Professor of Metaphysics and Edinburgh University: [Andy Clark - What is Panpsychism? - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5DyJpQ0574)

**Pure Science**

This approach acknowledges the hard problem but states that, in time, the normal processes of scientific investigation will provide an explanation. This might include some new scientific phenomena (for example the quantum effects postulated by Roger Penrose) but will basically be just another extension of scientific understanding.

**Eliminativism**

The eliminativists maintain that there is no hard problem, merely a misunderstanding of what consciousness is. Dan Dennett describes this type of approach in his book ‘Consciousness Explained’ (sometimes described by his critics as ‘Consciousness Explained Away’). Note that this is also a scientific approach, merely one that does not accept that the hard problem really exists. This is an example of the value of philosophy to science – the critical process of careful problem definition.

What we describe as consciousness is merely attention, sensations, thoughts, and reports about those thoughts. Anything sufficiently complex to behave like us and constructed like us would have our sensation of consciousness. It emerges from our complexity.

Dan Dennett promotes a ‘multiple drafts’ theory of consciousness in which our brain is constantly using external input to create sub consciousness multiple drafts of possible interpretations. What comes to our consciousness is then the dominant draft (a kind of ‘fame in the brain’) which operates in a ‘global workspace’ integrating brain processes across different parts of the brain.

The clearest explanations I have found are provided by Matt McCormick, Professor of Philosophy at California State University. So, to get to grips with this debate please find a couple of hours to watch the following three lectures.

[Dennett's "Are We Explaining Consciousness Yet?" and Multiple Drafts Model of Consciousness - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ragdoyyXuI)

[Dehaene and Naccache Global Workspace Theory Toward a Cognitive Neuroscience of Consciousness, I - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAUycwoDFXI)

[Dehaene and Naccache Global Workspace Theory, pt. 2 - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3A_Y0kQCCk)

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