

Philosophy (26/08/2025): Report by Pete Redgrave

Consciousness is hard

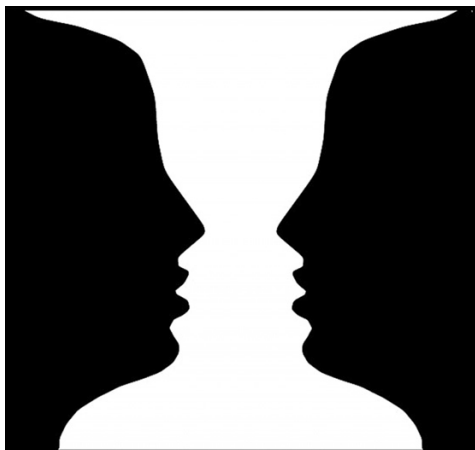
In 1994 David Chambers coined the term 'hard problem of consciousness' – why activity in the brain can give rise to 1st person subjective experiences. In the August meeting we reviewed some of the suggestions advanced to address this conundrum. The key debate is between Physicalists and the Anti-Physicalists. An Anti-physicalist would be Rene Descartes (the guy who was because he thought) who argued consciousness is an immaterial mental substance (soul) that somehow interacts with the brain. Sadly, there was no suggestion of how it might, even in principle. More recently, Chambers, proposed consciousness is an emergent non-physical property of certain physical systems, e.g. the brain. Again, there is no suggestion of how the immaterial might interact with the material.

On the other hand, Physicalists think since the universe is made of physical stuff consciousness must emerge from specific arrangements of it, e.g. the brain. Computational functionalism holds that consciousness depends more on what the physical stuff does – computational algorithms – independent of implementing hardware, or wetware (e.g. the brain). That consciousness might be a software issue suggests one day machine intelligence could have some form of consciousness.

Despite these suggestions, Chambers' hard problem remains unresolved. No current ideas can explain *how* 1st person subjective experience arises from workings of the brain. Daunted by this, Colin McGinn (1989) thought the hard problem of consciousness may be unsolvable by human minds, in the same way a dog is unable to grasp the finer points of quantum physics – in that I'm with the dog !

However, undeterred by McGinn's pessimistic view, consciousness is being actively investigated both by neuroscientists and the artificial intelligence community. For example, quantitative measures of how neural activity propagates in the brain correlate well with levels of consciousness (coma, anaesthesia, vegetative state, slow wave sleep, dreaming sleep, conscious wakefulness).

Finally, we discussed signs of neural activity being both sufficient and necessary for subjective experience to 'emerge'. For example, ambiguous figures can provide insights into how the brain models the external world. Here the brain constructs two subjectively plausible models from the sensory input – two black faces or a white vase in the illustration. As the neural processing of one model fatigues, our subjective perception of the sensory input switches automatically to the other model – an oscillation that cannot be prevented volitionally.



Come and join our next Philosophy meeting on Tuesday 22nd September when Pete Redgrave will continue the theme of Consciousness with reference to AI.

On Tuesday October 28th Ray Lee will lead us in Natural Philosophy. All welcome.