

Development of Consciousness

What is consciousness? Consciousness is still a mystery to man. Perhaps no aspect of mind is more familiar or more puzzling than consciousness and our conscious experience of self and world. While the science of physics is not complete, it is well enough understood; and the science of biology has answered many ancient questions regarding the nature of life, even if there are still gaps in our knowledge. Consciousness is another story.

While we are relatively sure consciousness arises from the physical system of the brain, we are not sure *how* it arises or *why* it arises. How can a physical system like the brain also be an *experiencer*? We are more familiar with consciousness than anything else in the world, nothing is presented more directly to us. Descartes is famous for saying I can doubt the existence of the outside world, even my own body, But, I think, I am conscious, therefore I am. I can question your consciousness, maybe you just look conscious and nothing is really going on up there, but I cannot question my own.

If you have a purely physical conception of the consciousness, it is possible to imagine a world of beings that do not have a subjective quality to experience, a world of "zombies". There are psychological and neurological explanations for everything we do that do not involve subjective experience, so it is easy enough to imagine this world of zombies. This world would make sense given a physical explanation of things; It would be a logically consistent world. But our world is not a

world of zombies, we experience things subjectively, and that begs the question, and that begs the question *why* is there consciousness?

The word consciousness is ambiguous, it refers to a number of different phenomena. Sometimes it refers to a cognitive capacity, the ability to introspect, sometimes it simply means “awakeness”. Sometimes it is tied to our ability to voluntarily control our behavior, or to be conscious of our actions.

Sometimes “to be conscious” of something means “to know about it”.

All these are acceptable uses, but not what we are talking about.

The psychologist Stuart Sutherland in the international dictionary of psychology defines consciousness as : “the having of perceptions, thoughts, and feelings; awareness. The term is impossible to define except in terms that are unintelligible without a grasp of what consciousness means. Many fall into the trap of confusing consciousness with self-consciousness—to be conscious it is only necessary to be aware of the external world. Consciousness is a fascinating but elusive phenomenon; it is impossible to specify what it is, what it does, or why it evolved. Nothing worth reading has been written about it.” The problems with this definition are obvious, though consciousness can be astonishingly powerful; it is extremely difficult to pin down the subject matter in order to talk about it.

<http://www.consciousentities.com/definitions.htm>

Perhaps the subject matter we are talking about can best be described as “the subjective quality of experience”. There is an internal aspect, what it feels like to be a cognitive agent. This internal aspect is conscious experience. Conscious experience can range from vivid color sensations to experiences of the faintest background aromas; from hard-edged pains to the elusive experience of thoughts at the tips of ones tongue; from mundane sounds and smells to the encompassing grandeur of musical experience; from the triviality of a nagging itch to the weight of a deep existential angst; from the specificity of the taste of peppermint to the generality of ones experience of selfhood. All these have a distinct experience quality. All are prominent parts of the inner life of the mind.

There are two concepts of the mind that can be discussed; the first is the *phenomenal* concept. This is the concept of mind as conscious experience, and of a mental state as a consciously experienced mental state. The second is the *psychological* concept of mind. This is the concept of mind as the causal or explanatory basis for behavior. On the phenomenal concept, mind is characterized by the way it feels; on the psychological concept, mind is characterized by what it *does*.

If you take for example a child burning herself on a hot stove, there are two ways you could explain this according to which concept of mind you use. If you use the phenomenal concept, you could say this child *experienced* the feeling of pain and *experienced* learning, Whereas a psychological concept of mind explanation would say something like, the organism entered the sort of state that tends to be produced

by damage to the organism, and that this tends to lead to aversion reactions to this sort of state in the future. The psychological concept does not explain what our experiences *feel* like.

Qualia is a term used in philosophy to refer to individual instances of subjective, conscious experience. The term derives from a Latin word meaning for "what sort" or "what kind." Qualia are the raw sensation of experience. When I look around and see the colors, red, blue, green, it feels a certain way. If I hear a far off clarinet, or smell mothballs, or taste a strawberry, all of these have a quality of subjective experience, and you have to experience them in order to know what they're like. The physical explanation just won't do, you actually have to experience things for yourself.

The knowledge argument (also known as Mary's room or Mary the super-scientist) is a philosophical thought experiment proposed by Australian philosopher Frank Jackson. The thought experiment attempts to establish that there are non-physical properties and attainable knowledge that can be discovered only through conscious experience.

The experiment goes like this. Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television monitor. She specializes in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what

goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like 'red', 'blue', and so on. She discovers, for example, just which wavelength combinations from the sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces via the central nervous system

In other words, Jackson's Mary is a scientist who knows everything there is to know about the science of color, but has never *experienced* color. The question that Jackson raises is: once she experiences color, does she learn anything new? I think most people would not hesitate to say that she learns something new. There is more to consciousness to physical processes. There is something *that's its like* to see red or green, and all the brain science in the world can't tell Mary that.

There is an easy problem and hard problem of explaining consciousness. The easy problem is the mechanistic one, say explaining how my brain perceives something in the environment. You could say a stimulus hits my retina and my brain integrates information and I react to it. You could give an explanation of those things in terms of circuits in the brain or computational mechanisms. The hard problem is explaining why all those processes are accompanied by conscious experience. Why does it feel like something from the inside, why do we have this amazing inner movie going on all the time? The story about neural circuits and brain chemistry leaves something out.

Higher consciousness is also described as a developed state of consciousness in which attention is improved, refined and enhanced, and aspects of the mind (such as thought, and perception) are transcended. It is considered thus to be a *higher* level of consciousness relative to ordinary consciousness, in the sense that a greater

awareness of reality is achieved. The concept of higher consciousness rests on the belief that the average, ordinary human being is only partially conscious due to the character of the untrained mind and the influence of 'lower' impulses and preoccupations. As a result, most humans are considered to be asleep (to reality) even as they go about their daily business. In a secular context, higher consciousness is usually associated with exceptional control over one's mind and will, intellectual and moral enlightenment, and profound personal growth. In a spiritual context, it may also be associated with transcendence, spiritual enlightenment, and union with the divine. States of higher consciousness can be achieved through music, meditation, intense study, religious rituals, the use of psychedelics and others substances and through other means.