

HPPH5036

Mind: Animals

Vuthy Hastings

What implications does the 'hard problem' of consciousness have for investigating the relationship between body and mind?

Introduction:

Our brain contains billions of neurons that operate through complex patterns, guiding our thoughts, emotions, and bodily actions. Science has made great strides towards unveiling and measuring these patterns, yet fails to adequately answer a fundamental philosophical issue brought to us by David Chalmers, the *hard problem* of consciousness (Nagel, T. 2024, What Is It Like to Be a Bat?). This problem reaches beyond the physical and measurable, beyond neural patterns and cognitive behaviours, into the realm of *subjective experience*. How is it that these highly complex physical processes give rise to our inner life's tapestry, filled with colours, sensations, and personal meaning?

In this essay, the philosophical doctrines of reductive materialism and Cartesian dualism are poked at, stripped apart, and put back together, exposing their faults and inability to provide an adequate answer to the hard problem of consciousness. Instead, I advocate for a richer metaphysical framework drawing upon Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit (Hegel, G.W.F., 2018, The Phenomenology of Spirit), and ancient Hermetic teachings (The Three Initiates, 2021, The Kybalion: A Study of the Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece). Here, Consciousness is not simply a by-product emerging from physical processes, nor is it an inexplicable immaterial essence; rather, the foundational fabric of existence unveils consciousness as an essential reality manifesting through mind and matter. If this is the case, our scientific methods demand reconsideration alongside our philosophical issues and existential assumptions.

Thomas Nagel:

Thomas Nagel highlights the elusive nature of consciousness in his essay 'What is it like to be a bat?' Nagel writes, 'the fact that an organism has conscious experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to be that organism' (Nagel, 2024, p. 6). Nagel asks us to consider the life of a bat navigating the world through echolocation, a somewhat alien sensory experience to humans. The crux of his argument emphasises a fundamental limitation: The reductionist method is suited to answering the 'easy problem of consciousness', that which focuses on function rather than explaining what it is like to experience that thing. E.g., attention, memory, and behaviour, with cognitive science, we can measure and conclude how these things occur and their purpose through explaining the ongoing activities within our brain. This does not explain what it is like to experience these things, simply what gives rise to them. Nagel not only diagnoses the deficiencies in trying to apply the same methodology for answering the easy problem of consciousness to the hard, but he also invites scientists and philosophers alike to move beyond mere correlation of neural activity, towards an acknowledgement of subjective experience having an integral part in our conscious day-to-day life.

Thought Experiment:

Imagine a world identical to Earth, every physical aspect, including all measurable parameters. The inhabitants who live on this planet are called Hollows and share human-like traits by laughing, crying, making art and participating in intellectual discussions. However, they lack any inner experience, an empty vessel of behaviour without qualia. The thought experiment illustrates a distinction between *functional mechanism* and the *subjective essence* of consciousness.

These beings exhibit human-like behaviours without any subjective experience as they remain empty in regards to qualia. This scenario highlights a profound distinction between functional mechanisms and the subjective essence of consciousness. The mere possibility of these philosophical zombies underscores a pivotal limitation of physicalism: Conscious experience cannot simply equate to observable or measurable functions; thus, the gulf that separates function from Phenomenology requires further research of a deeper metaphysical explanation.

Frank Jackson:

Frank Jackson's celebrated thought experiment (Epiphenomenal Qualia, 1982) introduces Mary, a scientist confined to a black-and-white room, who has learned every physical detail about colour perception without ever experiencing colour herself. The moment Mary steps outside and sees colour for the first time, something extraordinary happens—she acquires new knowledge. However, applying Hermetic principles, particularly the Principle of Mentalism, Correspondence and the Principle of Polarity, the notion of "new" knowledge becomes questionable. The principle of mentalism states that all things are essentially mental, alongside correspondence, which suggests there is an exact reflection between all planes of existence. From this perspective, Mary's acquisition of "new" knowledge can be viewed as recollection of a reality already inherently interconnected with her consciousness. The principle of polarity states that everything has its pair of opposites. Reminding us that *knowledge and ignorance* are polarities, what appears then as new knowledge to finite beings is mere recognition of an existing polarity previously unseen. The question now arises: Does Mary truly learn something new, or does she simply recollect an infinite reality embedded within universal consciousness?

Let us engage in a brief Socratic dialogue to illuminate this:

Student: Tell me, was Mary's discovery of colour truly new knowledge, or merely something already known but forgotten?

Teacher: Imagine knowledge as an infinite library hidden within consciousness itself. When Mary stepped out and saw colour, did she truly gain new knowledge, or did she merely find a hidden key to a room in that library?

Student: A hidden key, perhaps, but doesn't finding a key constitute gaining new knowledge?

Teacher: Consider this—was the room itself always there, filled with its truths and revelations, waiting patiently for Mary to enter, or did it only come into existence when she unlocked the door?

Student: If the room was always there, then knowledge must have existed independently, awaiting Mary's discovery.

Teacher: Precisely. But without Mary's conscious experience, the room's truths remained unrealized. Was her experience then a discovery or a recollection?

Student: Perhaps both—she discovered it through her finite perception but recollected it from an infinite reservoir of universal consciousness.

Teacher: Now take this further—if all knowledge pre-exists in potential form, and consciousness simply unveils it, then are all discoveries not acts of remembrance?

Student: Then what of ignorance? If truth waits to be known, does ignorance become a shadow of that unlit potential?

Teacher: Indeed, and this is the role of consciousness: to illuminate the veiled truths. Mary's case is not just about colour. It's an allegory for all learning.

Student: Then, teacher, are we all simply wandering through this vast library, guided by the light of our awareness?

Teacher: Beautifully said. Every conscious act is an expedition into the infinite. Our discoveries are merely the pages we choose to turn.

Thus, Mary's experience showcases' consciousness as an active agent actualising infinite possibilities. Finite beings continuously engage with infinite potentials inherently woven into universal consciousness, manifesting these potentials through their subjective experience.

Revisiting the Problem of Consciousness:

This interpretation of Frank Jackson's knowledge argument does not take away completely from the title's question, let us consider again the hard problem of consciousness. Mary might not have recollected anything new objectively but subjectively, nonetheless, the occurrence of subjective experience does come fourth and it begs the question, what is its cause? Reductionist and physicalist frameworks, which regard consciousness as emerging from physical interactions struggle with explaining this deeper metaphysical dimension. The thought experiment enlightened us to the

interconnectedness between consciousness and reality, viewing it as a simple by-product of matter fails to capture the subjective experience of life and being.

Cartesian dualism takes on a different route in trying to explain the metaphysical and phenomenological aspects of life. Descartes proposes that 'there is a great difference between mind and body, inasmuch as body is by nature always divisible, and the mind is entirely indivisible' (Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation VI, p. 54). Both substances are offered their own processes: the physical adopts mechanical operations, whilst the mental adopts those of thinking. Descartes reinforces this distinction clearly when he says, 'The mind does not perceive by the eyes, nor by the nerves, nor by the brain, but only by the faculty of thinking' (Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation VI, p. 56). Descartes might've wanted to preserve the sanctity of consciousness from mechanistic processes, or perhaps keep his metaphysical framework free of contradictions, or both. In doing so, he created a chasm too vast to cross. He casts the mental realm into a private theatre, a chamber accessed through introspection:

'When I consider the mind, or myself in so far as I am only a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something quite single and complete. By contrast, when I imagine a body, or any other extended thing, I do indeed understand that it is divisible into parts' (Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation VI, p. 54).

This segregation serves as a downfall for Descartes; it dilutes the relational nature of consciousness by isolating it from the embodied, social and interactive context that gives it texture. Consider substance dualism versus property dualism: the former postulates two distinct substances, the latter posits two types of properties. Neither of which resolve the core dilemma: how can an immaterial feature 'emerge' from or interact with a material base without violating the causal closure of the physical world?

Furthermore, Descartes' framework lacks explanatory traction on the hard problem of consciousness. He successfully demonstrates the existence of the thinking subject, but there is no valid account of how subjective experience – qualia- arises or relates causally to the physical world. In declaring mind as a distinct, non-extended substance does not explain how it connects with the brain, or answer the question of why mental states are accompanied by conscious awareness. Descartes leaves this gap unresolved; he merely repositions the problem to the pineal gland but does not give a coherent account on how it works. The interaction problem remains unaddressed, revealing the dualist model as an explanatory placeholder rather than a genuine theory of mind. Thus, despite its historical

influence, Cartesian dualism ultimately sidesteps rather than solves the central mystery of how and why consciousness occurs at all.

Science, specifically the neuroscience area, offers some answers that partially support the metaphysical framework that I draw upon. Recent papers, such as 'Neural correlates of consciousness' by Christof Koch and associates, aim to identify specific brain regions and activity patterns associated with consciousness. Using advanced neuroimaging techniques such as EEG and fMRI, researchers are trying to isolate the minimal number of neuronal events and mechanisms needed for a specific conscious experience. As Koch states, 'the search for the neural correlates of consciousness (NCC) is aimed at identifying the minimal neuronal mechanisms jointly sufficient for any one specific conscious percept' (Koch et al., 2016, p. 307). The 'no-report' paradigm in this research attempts to eliminate confusion from verbal or motor reports by finding correlates of consciousness that are independent of external behavioural expressions. This might advance the precision of brain consciousness mapping, but it does not touch the deeper ontological question of why these neural correlates are accompanied by subjective experience at all.

Benard J. Baars offers up a theoretical framework called the Global Workspace Theory, which suggests that consciousness arises when information is globally broadcast to multiple cognitive systems. The point of the broadcast is that it creates a unified field of awareness that integrates various processes such as memory, attention, and evaluation. Baars describes consciousness as 'a distributed society of specialists that is equipped with a working memory, capable of binding and integrating information' (Baars, 1988, p. 148). This workspace model is an elegant way to describe how consciousness functions within a cognitive system, but it assumes rather than explains the transition between unconscious neural computation to conscious experience. The workspace is more or less a metaphorical bridge that brings together mechanisms and phenomenology, but it lacks a metaphysical account of how or why such access results in qualia.

Despite these advances, none of the two approaches, empirical mapping (Koch), and functional broadcasting (Baars), can fully answer the central metaphysical problem: How can an immaterial feature such as consciousness 'emerge' from or causally interact with a physical substrate without violating the causal closure of the physical world?

They have provided compelling correlations and theoretical solutions but do not explain sufficiently the ontological shift from brain matter to felt experience. They describe what the brain does when we are conscious but not why being conscious feels like something from the inside. In this light,

neuroscience may be ill-suited alone to resolve the hard problem of consciousness, and points instead to the necessity of a complementary metaphysical framework.

Conclusion:

In this essay, I have attempted to decipher the mystery surrounding the hard problem of consciousness. Starting with Thomas Nagel's profound metaphor of the bat, we recognized that consciousness requires something other than objective description; it necessitates wrestling with the elusive quality of 'what it is like'. This thought casts a shadow over reductionist and physicalist explanations, which often succeed in describing function but fall short in accounting for lived experience. Through different thought experiments like the Hollow World and Frank Jackson's black and white room, we explored the divide between observable behaviour and inner awareness. Whilst the Hollows act indistinguishably from humans, the lack of qualia renders them as philosophical zombies that challenge the assumption that function implies feeling. Mary's experience was framed through both contemporary philosophy and ancient Hermeticism, it reveals consciousness as a bridge between the finite and the infinite, not as simply a computation artefact, but an act of becoming aware.

Dualists frameworks like Descartes' posit two distinct substances to try to preserve consciousness. However, as we have seen, his model introduces more questions than answers, failing to offer a viable answer for how immaterial mind interacts with the material body without violating causal closure. Whilst Descartes successfully demonstrates the uniqueness and privacy of consciousness, his metaphysical dualism falls short of a coherent interactionist account, especially in the light of modern philosophical scrutiny. The current scientific models and metaphysical paradigms are inadequate and suggest a deeper framework may be necessary. Hegel's dialectical unfolding of spirit and Hermetic teachings treat consciousness not as an emergent property, but as foundational to reality itself. Such metaphysical systems invite us to consider consciousness not as a puzzle to be solved through mechanistic analysis, but as the very condition that makes knowing, being, and understanding possible. Thus, the hard problem of consciousness challenges us not just to refine our science or update our philosophy, but to question the very categories by which we make sense of existence. Consciousness may not simply emerge from the world—it may, in fact, be the reason the world appears at all.

References

Baars, B.J. (1988) *A Cognitive Theory of Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Descartes, R. (1641) *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by J. Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hegel, G.W.F. (2018) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by T. Pinkard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jackson, F. (1982) 'Epiphenomenal Qualia', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 32(127), pp. 127–136.

Koch, C., Massimini, M., Boly, M. and Tononi, G. (2016) 'Neural correlates of consciousness: progress and problems', *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 17(5), pp. 307–321.

Nagel, T. (2024) *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The Three Initiates (2021) *The Kybalion: A Study of the Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece*. Sunsight Press.

Bulletin, 215(3), pp. 216–242., G.W.F. (2018) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by T. Pinkard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

