

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

The relation between the mind and the body is a problem that was first discussed by the French philosopher René Descartes, in his book *'Meditations of First Philosophy'*, in which he discusses his meditations on understanding existence, and his attempts to discover what can be proven to be real. It was this thought process which led to him doubting the existence of his own physical form, and so he concluded that the mind and body must be separate entities that are linked together, which became known as Cartesian Dualism. This idea of the person being the soul, and not the body is disputed by theories such as Reductionism, which are backed by our scientific understanding of how the mind functions as a material process, as opposed to a spirit which inhabits our bodies, though one of the criticisms of this theory is that it ignores consciousness, hence the hard problem of consciousness. In this Essay, I will be discussing the different approaches to the body and mind, and how they interact with the hard problem of consciousness, and the implications that this problem has on the mind-body problem as a whole.

René Descartes theorised that the mind, or soul, of a person is a distinct entity apart from the body, and that the body cannot be proven to exist, as it was possible for him to place doubt on the existence of his body. Descartes doubted his own body in the same way that he was able to doubt the existence of everything else present within the material world, which is through the 'evil demon' doubt, which states that just as there exists an all powerful God, there may yet also exist an evil demon that has such powers over him that it has created an illusion of all of the material world in an attempt to deceive him. Because it is entirely possible that such a being exists, that places doubt on the existence of all that we see and perceive, and that also extends to the body that we believe to be ours in the first place. If it is possible for such a being to deceive all of our senses, then why not be able to give us a false sense of a body. As such, the only thing that Decartes could prove without a doubt is that his consciousness, or soul was real.

Decartes separates his conscious mind from his body in the sixth meditation when he writes "although the whole mind appears to be united with the whole body, if the foot is cut off, or the arm, or any other part of the body, I know that nothing is therefore subtracted from the mind". This lack of subtraction from the mind, despite the removal of physical limbs is a strong argument for why the mind and the body are not the same system, but are instead two connected systems that function on their own, while working together.

Decartes' theory of mind-body dualism can stand up to the hard problem of consciousness, as his theory, unlike reductionism, allows for the existence of consciousness outside of a biological process. Decartes separates his conscious mind from his body in the sixth meditation when he writes "although the whole mind appears to be united with the whole body, if the foot is cut off, or the arm, or any other part of the body, I know that nothing is therefore subtracted from the mind".

In the second meditation Descartes removed his body from the question altogether by stating that he cannot even be certain that it exists. He writes “Am I so bound up with my body and senses that I cannot exist without them? But I convinced myself there was nothing at all in the world, no earth, no sky, no minds, no bodies”.¹ All is false to Descartes apart from his own consciousness, which he knows exists for sure, whether it be a spirit or just some mind, it is apart from the physical processes, and exists just as itself. This acceptance of consciousness means that Descartes, unlike other theories, completely circumvents the hard problem of consciousness, and would not even need to address it as a separate question, unlike the theory that I am going to be covering next, which is reductionism.

Reductionism is the theory that all ideas can be reduced to the sum of their parts, and that everything can be explained through reducing it to its basic principles. This theory has been attacked using the hard problem of consciousness, such as in Thomas Nagel’s paper ‘*what is it like to be a bat*’ which deals with how we view consciousness, and how we decide what creatures are conscious. Nagel uses the term ‘subjective character of experience’ which is to mean what it is like to actually be that organism. In order to be conscious then an organism must have a subjective character of experience, as consciousness is the act of being able to experience or to have a qualia.

Nagel’s criticism of reductionism is that as it reduces humans to a mixture of electric signals and chemicals in the brain, however it does not account for consciousness. Nagel states “If the analysis leaves something out, the problem will be falsely posed. It is useless to base the defense of materialism on any analysis of mental phenomena that fails to deal explicitly with their subjective character. For there is no reason to suppose that a reduction which seems plausible when no attempt is made to account for consciousness can be extended to include consciousness”.² I would agree with this criticism, as if reductionism is to reduce the human mind to the sum of its parts, then it must also take consciousness into account, as it is a vital part of the mind, though I would also like to point out that we are currently unable to reduce consciousness, as we are not even close to beginning to understand what consciousness is, or how we would even go about trying.

Another way that the hard problem of consciousness can be used against Reductionism is that the same reductive reasoning could be used in the case of philosophical zombies (humans with all of the functions of a human without consciousness), and artificial intelligence. Neither of these would have any form of consciousness, but would be able to pass as human through reductionism.

¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. by Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 18.

² Thomas Nagel, ‘What Is It Like to Be a Bat?’, *The Philosophical Review*, 83.4, (1974), 435-450 (p. 437).

The third theory that I will cover is physicalism, which is the theory that everything is based within the physical world, and can be explained through physical interaction between everything. The problem with this theory is that consciousness isn't a physical thing that can be defined and understood, and so it cannot fall under the physical realm. Consciousness may exist completely within its own dimension entirely for all we know, as we have no way to define it. I would like to use the Example of philosophical zombies again, as it is important to this argument. Using physicalism, a human being that expresses all of the characteristics of a human being, but possesses no qualia is just as much a human as a regular conscious human with a qualia, as consciousness cannot be defined through the physical world. The same can be said for artificial intelligence, as if humans are nothing more than neurons firing in a brain, then surely the code of an artificial intelligence would be nearly identical to this, and so despite not having a qualia of its own, it would be considered to be the same as a human.

There is a problem with the argument of philosophical zombies, which is that it could be argued that such a being is impossible to exist, as if it has all of the functions of a human, then it would inherently be conscious simply because it has these functions. Though I would argue that if this is the case, then AI would also be impossible to create without a qualia, since it too has such functions, the only difference being that it is made of silicon and metal instead of organic matter like a human.

I believe that an argument could also be made that the body and the mind in the case of physicalism are one in the same, as the body and the mind are just two systems that respond to stimuli in a set way. This is shown in human reflexes, which is the body reacting to a stimulus before you are able to consciously process it. The body itself could be compared to the brain in this way, purely from a physical perspective, and the body and mind could simply be two minds working together from a physicalist perspective. This is because physicalism has no answer to the hard problem of consciousness

The final theory is the Eliminativism theory of qualia, which is a theory which attempts to completely remove subjective experience, and consciousness from the argument entirely, because it is not scientific, and cannot be proven. I believe that this attempt to simply remove qualia is incorrect, as it would mean that those who follow this idea of a lack of qualia are stating that they themselves have not experienced any form of subjective experience, and that their very consciousness is unscientific and thus does not exist.

This theory however would allow for philosophical zombies to exist, as it supposes that there was never any qualia for them to lack in the first place. This would place humans, philosophical zombies, and artificial intelligence in the same category, since there is no place for subjective experience and consciousness within this empirical, science based world view. Assuming that we had no way to tell that even we ourselves were conscious, then I would concede to this view, but the fact that I am conscious and am able to argue this point using my own intellect proves otherwise.

To conclude, I believe that in order to have a theory of the mind-body problem that is able to stand against the hard problem of consciousness, it needs to take into account that consciousness may not be physical at all, but instead as is suggested in 'Explaining Consciousness: A (Very) Different Approach to the "Hard Problem"' that it may be multidimensional.³ Failing to agree with this theory, they would at least have to admit that it is currently not possible to define consciousness in any physical way, as we lack almost all understanding of what consciousness even is or how it came about. Eliminativism doesn't seem like a very serious theory, as the premise is already disproved by the very fact that the theory exists in the first place, and so does not stand against the hard problem of consciousness at all.

The only theory that appears to not be affected by the hard problem is Cartesian Dualism, as consciousness is directly addressed, and if anything appears to be the primary talking point for his solution to his relationship between the body and mind. It is my opinion that currently, Descartes dualist view of the mind-body problem is the strongest, as it is proven entirely through logic, not requiring any empirical evidence, while at the same time arguing that empirical evidence is an illusion, and it not at all affected by the hard problem of consciousness.

Bibliography

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³ Paul F. Cunningham, 'Explaining Consciousness: A (Very) Different Approach to the "Hard Problem"', *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 34.1, (2013), 41-62 (p. 42).