

What difficulties stand in the way of a materialist view of the mind, according to which thoughts, feelings and sensations are ultimately nothing more than processes in the brain?

This essay outlines two difficulties faced by the materialists and it will not try to go into detail regarding each of the difficulties. I will use the words materialism[1] and physicalism[2] as synonyms and so the word materialism is used in its hardest form. In this form; the materialist's philosophy states that everything is material and exists in space and time. Meaning that consciousness and mental phenomena are the results exclusively of material interactions.

Qualia

In order for the materialist's view to be accepted, they first have to overcome the hard problem of consciousness. I define the word consciousness as subjective experience and an example would be the "redness" of red and the "warmness" of warmth. For this kind of subjective conscious experience I shall use the word qualia[4].

Although the existence of qualia has not been proven many dualists have put forward thought experiments to prove its existence. The knowledge argument[5] is one of the most used arguments to prove the existence of qualia.

The knowledge argument 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 the contraction of the vocal chords and expulsion of air from the lungs that results in the uttering of the sentence 'The sky is blue'.... What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a color television monitor? Will she learn anything or not? It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. But then is it inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. But she had all the physical information. Ergo there is more to have than that, and Physicalism is false."[5]

The thought experiment shows that even though Mary knew everything about how the physical side of colour would be used to represent colour in the mind, she still had a new experience when released from the room. For example, she would have learnt the experience of seeing red and this is something that dualists would argue that you cannot get by studying just the physical properties of the brain. Hence there is something more than just physical information regarding the mind.

Materialists argue that qualia do not even exist and Mary would know what the experience of red would be if she truly had all the knowledge of colour. The problem comes down to the fact that language does not have the means to express what the “redness” of red would feel like. For example, if Mary would have never seen a triangle then she would know what it would be like to see one if explained to her as this can be explained with just a few words.

Philosophical Zombie

A philosophical zombie (p-zombie) is a hypothetical being used in the philosophy of mind by dualists to refute the idea of a materialist view of the mind. It looks and acts like a human being except that it lacks conscious experience, meaning that if you poked it with a sharp stick it would not feel pain but behave as if it did. If such a zombie could exist, even metaphysically, then this would be a logical problem for materialists as then it would show that there is something beyond a materialistic cause.

If you can imagine that a world existed exactly like our own except for the fact that the people lacked consciousness. The people in the imaginary world would be p-zombies. If this world is conceivable then this is enough to prove qualia in the eyes of dualists. Many materialists however object to the idea, that just because something is conceivable then it is possible. However, dualists may not think that they really exist but that they could exist had the laws of the universe been different. In the same way a flying elephant could have existed had the laws of gravity been different. Even this possibility of them existing leads to the conclusion that human brain states and consciousness are not one and the same and hence physicalism is false. For example if a p-zombie existed that could not feel pain then that would mean a brain state is existing but not consciousness and hence consciousness must be something external to the brain and so not physical.

References:

[1] Materialism.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Materialism>

[2] Physicalism.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/physicalism/>

[3] Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness, Chalmers, David.J.

<http://consc.net/papers/facing.html>

[4] Qualia.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qualia>

[5] Qualia. The knowledge Argument.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qualia-knowledge/>

[6] Critics of Qualia.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qualia#Daniel_Dennett