

Essay Question:

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

Essay Answer:

The problem of explaining consciousness has long stood as a challenge in philosophical thought – defining consciousness and the properties of consciousness on the basis that it even exists at all.

Various theories of mind range from the materialist view, where existence of ‘mind’ is explained in terms in physical processes in the brain to dualism, that the body is comprised of both material and non material substances, body being material and mind being immaterial. At the other end of the spectrum is idealism which argues that everything is a product of the mind and there is no physical objective world.

This essay will focus on the theory of materialism, exploring the key elements of the theory and the challenges that emerge from this theory.

Australian philosopher David Chalmers refers to consciousness as the hard problem of mind. How can subjective phenomena emerge from objective physical neural processes? He describes the ‘easy problems’ of mind as those problems that can be explained through understanding the functional processes at work in the brain. The common example used is that of pain. From a physical perspective, the brain’s firing of c-fibres is defined as the physical response to for example the stubbing of my toe. Is pain therefore simply equivalent to the firing of c-fibres in my brain? Can I be expected to believe that the sensation of pain is nothing more than activated c-fibres? Does this account for the feeling of pain?

A thought experiment used by philosophers relates to how an alien would feel pain. If we assume an alien wasn’t a carbon based life form and therefore would not possess c-fibres, could we conclude an alien could not feel pain or is it possible an alien could feel the sensation of pain albeit a different mechanism of pain.

This subjective indescribable experience or ‘qualia’ is the explanatory gap which materialists have yet to explain.

As research on the mind has progressed, materialist theories have broken off into various substreams. Emergent theory promotes the view that consciousness emerges from the integrated workings of the brain. The analogy of water is frequently cited, where ‘wetness’ only emerges once hydrogen and oxygen atoms bind to form H₂O molecules and only when H₂O molecules bond to form water, can wetness as a subjective property of water emerge. Whilst the physics of water are now clearly understood, the feeling of wetness however still remains a problem for which materialists cannot provide an account for.

Thomas Nagel refers to the the subjective experience as ‘what it’s like to be something’. In his book he chose the example of a bat, and whether there is a subjective experience of what it is like to be a bat? Materialists can explain the physics of sonar and echo location but does this describe what it would be like to experience the world as a bat?

Frank Jackson poses a thought experiment of Mary, the talented neuroscientist. Mary has never seen the world in colour. For her, the world is black and white. She lives in a black and White House, eats black and white food on black and white plate at a black and white table. Owing to her impressive intellect however, Mary studies the science of optics and colour. She understands how

light rays enter the retina hitting the optic nerve at the back of her eye and sending neural signals to the image processing centre of the brain. She studies the properties of light and knows all the physics of the visible spectrum. One day, Mary wakes up to find that her colour blindness has ceased. She can now see the world in its wonderful arrays of colour. The question posed by Frank Jackson is whether Mary would learn something new with her enhanced colourful sight? Would she have an 'aha' moment or would she recognise a red rose and its quality of redness owing to her prior physics studies of optics and light?

Some philosophers like Patricia Churchland argue that the conclusion of this thought experiment is wrong. Churchland argues that Mary has not learned anything new as the fact that she can now see in colour is just old information in a new guise.

Another counter argument put forwards by materialists is that Mary has not learned anything new but has now just acquired the ability or capacity to appreciate colour much in the same way as knowing all the facts about riding a bike and now being able to ride the bike being the acquired ability of bike riding facts.

These counter arguments however still fail to address the issue of what it feels like to see red or ride a bicycle.

The hard problem of consciousness also arises in the field of Artificial intelligence. If thinking can be explained as an algorithmic process with for example neurons firing in the frontal cortex, if computer scientists can model the brain by developing a neural network as complex and interconnected as the human brain, could this neural network think? Could machines become conscious? Emergent theories argue that consciousness would emerge from this neural network complexity. A range of thought experiments again raise question marks over this perspective.

John Searle's 'Chinese room' thought experiment argues that even if one could create an algorithm where a question posed in English could be answered in perfectly translated Chinese without the recipient of the question in the Chinese room understanding Chinese, if there was a sufficiently large library of Chinese characters and instructions on what characters to select based on the English question provided. Even if the person in the room followed all the steps and handed back a perfect answer in Chinese, this would not prove he or she understood Chinese. This is the challenge of syntax versus semantics where syntax refer to the structure of language whilst semantics refers to the its meaning. Searles argument is that computers understand syntax but not semantics which poses doubt as to whether a physical machine could become conscious.

Materialism has also now split off into a theory called eliminative materialism which posits that any mention of mind should be removed from our diction. The eliminative materialists refer to 'mind' as folk lore much in the same way as demons and evil spirits were viewed as the cause of disease until we understood bacteria and viruses etc. In time concepts of mind they argue will also be discarded once the workings of the brain are better understood. Meanwhile, references and vocabulary of mind should he eliminated.

To conclude, in spite of the significant progress particularly in the past 50 years into the brain, the view that we don't possess a consciousness is hard for most people to accept. The feeling of self and what is it like to experience the world as a unique 'I' is something that seems to deeply embedded in humans. We seem to have an intuitional feeling of joy consciousness that transcends the physical processes of the brain.