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The 'Hard' Problem and Neural Correlates of Consciousness

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“Astonishing Hypothesis”?

The puzzle of consciousness arises, as Fodor (2002) puts it because: “details aside, Lucretius had things about right. What there really is is atoms-and-the-void, and there’s really nothing else.” This is the idea that Crick (1994) refers to as “The Astonishing Hypothesis.” However, perhaps the most remarkable feature of the staggering intellectual, philosophical effort devoted to this puzzle is just how *unastonishing* the raw intuition should be. As Loar (1997), Lycan (1990), Rorty (1979), Dennett (1991) and Papineau (2002) have all asked: Why should we expect the subjective contents of experience themselves to reveal anything of their physical basis or causal origins. Nevertheless, a burgeoning literature attests to the seriousness with which the “hard problem” of consciousness is being approached in philosophical and scientific research. Hameroff (2007) has recently defended his conception of the brain as a quantum computer, and the search for the neural correlates of consciousness (NCC) is being undertaken as a meaningful, if optimistic, goal (Koch 2004). I suggest that the vast, growing literature has nothing new to say since the 17th century – a symptom of the fact that the puzzle is a pseudo-problem, the Phenomenological Fallacy (Place 1956). The originality of my own argument consists, ironically, in pointing out that there is nothing new to be said.

Phenomenological Fallacy

Although deserving to be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum*, these puzzles have been taken to suggest panpsychism. Thus, Nagel (1979), Chalmers (1996), Hameroff and Penrose (1996) consider the subjectivity of consciousness to be a fundamental feature of the world just like space-time, mass, energy, charge and so on. Apart from entailing that even a thermostat is conscious, this view makes the search for neural correlates of phenomenal consciousness in the circuitry of the brain pointless. If Lycan (1990) is right about the subjectivity of this sense of “the mental” and its intrinsically perspectival character, the entire, vast philosophical industry has succumbed to a “qualia sickness” after slipping on his “Banana Peel” (Lycan 1990). Lycan blames the slip on an “inadvertent act-object” model in which sensations are construed as *things* which appear to us as if encountered externally – the error I have characterized as the ‘tripartite model’ (Slezak 2002a). Jackson (2007, 55) now confesses that this was his own error when he believed in epiphenomenal qualia on the basis of his famous Mary Knowledge Argument. The complaint was made by U.T.

Place (1956) under the heading “the phenomenological fallacy” in the paper that inaugurated modern materialism. The error is a version of the notorious sense-datum fallacy, and precisely the same complaint was made in the seventeenth century by Arnauld against Malebranche, repeated later by Reid against Hume, Austin against Ayer, and onwards (Slezak 2004, 2006a). Significantly, the same error is the one that Pylyshyn (2003) has repeatedly charged against pictorial theories of mental imagery and his critique has been supported by my own experiment on mental rotation (Slezak 1995, 2002c). Indeed, the seductiveness of the error is seen in its independent emergence in other domains of cognitive science such as language (Slezak 2002b) and decision theory (Slezak 2006b) which thereby serve to reinforce the Place’s analysis of the ‘Phenomenological Fallacy’ as the source of perplexity about consciousness.

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