Chalmers’ Problem of Consciousness as Related to Cartesian Dualism, Revisited

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In *Meditations one and two*, Descartes famously proposed the mind-body problem in which he postulated that a non-material substance mind which constitutes our consciousness exists in tandem with a material body that by itself is not capable of consciousness. David Chalmers challenges the biological and functional basis of consciousness as proposed by his contemporaries, and points out that every attempt so far to explain consciousness in terms of the material body has failed. Chalmers’ take on the problem of consciousness is more sympathetic to that of Descartes’ in that when drawing from both Descartes and Chalmers, one could conclude that the reason that functional explanations of biological processes fail to identify why we experience is because the mind, while existing in parallel with the body, exists in a “dimension” that is separate from the material world, and thus cannot be fully explained from our limited perspectives.

Descartes first encountered this conundrum when he set out to discredit the stance of extreme skepticism. The skeptic position, perhaps largely influenced by existentialist thought that was prevalent at the time, held that humans were so fallible that there was no way to know if anything was true and therefore we should just assume that everything is false. To address this argument, Descartes reasoned that simply proving a single concept or notion to be irrefutably true would be enough to silence the skeptics. While contemplating the existence of truth and reality, Descartes rationalized the existence of the only truth that anyone could be absolutely sure of—that one exists because one is conscious\(^1\)—was contingent on the fact that humans have an intrinsic, natural substance. This substance, the very essence of human consciousness and being, must in some way include the transcendental aspect of consciousness since the ability of the human mind to transcend one’s immediate physical location is not necessarily bound to the
physicality of location of the mind or body. Even in the instance of the dream problem proposed in Meditation 1, the substance of the individual is evident in the dream itself, and yet is also a self-evident property of the “real” individual that presumably exists somewhere else. And it follows logically that no physical object or physical manifestation of a substance can be in two places at once, leading one to believe that it is quite possible that one’s substance is not bound in the physical nature of existence.

This stipulation would perhaps best explain why physical and physiological explanations of consciousness fail to address the “hard problem” as put forth by Chalmers. Due to advancements in neurophysiology and biology, it is commonly accepted that the brain, if nothing more than a mass of tissue containing intricate networks of neurons and synapses, is responsible for coordinating and controlling basic life functions and processes. A mixture of chemical and electrical reactions are single-handedly responsible for sustaining bodily processes as well as taking in and interpreting information perceived through the senses. While these processes have proven useful in explaining how, for example, electro-magnetic radiation in the form of visible light enters the eye, reacts with light sensitive rod and cone cells which then transmit information to the occipital lobe of the brain via an optic nerve where it is interpreted and ultimately made available to our consciousness, they leave an important part of the question unanswered; that is why these reactions translate into conscious experience in the first place. The hard problem, according to Chalmers, is that physiological attempts at explaining experience fail to account for how the biological registration and interpretation of events translates into us having the experience, and thus leave an “extra ingredient” to be desired. This missing ingredient, though highly contested, has eluded cognitive scientists and led some to conclude that the reason the
enigma of experience is so abstract and indefinite is because it cannot be explained strictly in
terms of the physical; instead, the phenomenon of experience must be taken as fundamental and
irreducible. Much like the fundamental laws of physics, experience must simply be accepted as
true\(^5\). Once this underlying basis of explanation is established, we could continue to build off this
basis to construct a more complete picture of the processes involved in experiencing
consciousness.

This notion that the mind exists in parallel with the body closely mirrors Descartes’
theories on the human substance. It wouldn’t be entirely correct that to say that either the mind
or the body interacts causally with the other, but that the mind enables the perception of the body
and the body facilitates the manifestation of the mind and its physical representation. This can
perhaps best be demonstrated with the thought experiment involving a teleportation device. The
scenario goes as follows: suppose there exists some type of device that can teleport an individual
from one point in space to another. However, to do so would require that the individual be
essentially broken down to the most basic constituent parts and then reassembled again at the
second location from entirely new, but qualitatively identical, atoms. Suppose also that the
individual would retain all memories, characteristics and personality traits. Would the individual
be the same person as he was before he was teleported? In short, the answer is yes. While the
physical body itself would be made up of entirely new atoms, the new atoms would be identical
to the atoms that previously composed the individual (after all, our bodies are constantly losing
and gaining atoms at such a rate that the body will be composed of entirely new atoms within 7
years). Furthermore, since the “substance” that defines an individual supersedes the physical and
was transferred to the new body, the individual is essentially the same in all respects except for unnecessarily technical distinctions.

Concurrently, it is important to consider the possible implications of supposing that such a thing as a human substance even exists. Such an assumption, while useful in creating a seemingly concrete basis for conclusion with regards to the problem of consciousness, poses serious potential issues for the dualist position. By so boldly asserting that humans have a substance that is not limited by physical boundaries, I do not mean to claim that all humans have a defining “essence”, as to do so would create all sorts or complications when arguing from the existentialist perspective. What I do mean is that, in the words of Nagel, “there is something that it is like” to be a human, that something being the conscious experience. And as already explained, conscious experience is a phenomenon that is, as far as has been shown to date, exclusive to humans and common to everyone regardless of physiological differences.

From all previous considerations, it can be concluded that, though separate in time and motivation, Chalmers’ views on the dualistic nature of the mind and body are similar to Descartes’. In less than technical terms, both Chalmers and Descartes concluded that the mind and body exist in parallel but that the mind and consciousness of an individual is not manifested physically, but exists as an entity that has yet to be understood fully. Chalmers even goes as far as to propose taking the phenomenon of experience as fundamental to the human condition and expanding on the topic from there. While it would be foolish to conclude that these views are absolute and certain beyond all doubt, it becomes clear upon deeper analysis that given what is known to us at this point, the concept of a metaphysical system of experience is the most logical interpretation of consciousness.
1: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 33


