

Sisyphus's Boulder

Consciousness and the limits of the
knowable

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Introduction

The problem of consciousness is completely intractable. We will never understand consciousness in the deeply satisfying way we've come to expect from our sciences. This is due to a logical property of consciousness itself. The intractability of consciousness defines a boundary to knowledge; it limits what we can know about consciousness. Because it is a barrier, it does not entail dualism or idealism, nor is it a threat to materialism. At the same time, this property does explain both the resurgent plausibility of dualism as well as the fact that very little scientific progress to date has been made on reductively explaining consciousness.

We came to these conclusions when we sat down one afternoon several years ago to discuss the problem of intractability and the argument from it to consciousness's explanatory dead-end. Dietrich argued from the dead-end to the conclusion that there would not be a science of consciousness worthy of the name. Hardcastle argued from the fact that there already is a science of consciousness and the near-certainty that it will grow in robustness to the conclusion that there will somehow be an explanation of consciousness, of some sort. Neither one of us appreciated the value of the others' viewpoint, to say the least. Yet both of us remained convinced of the correctness of the intractability, so we continued talking.

A key moment came when we realized that sciences don't have to explain things – at least they don't have to explain things in a way that connects them with that vast realm of explanations comprising science's great successes. Once we realized this, we realized that the focus of debate in consciousness research was not on target. The (or a) primary focus is between those who think that consciousness is a nonmaterial property of the universe and those who think that it is a material property – roughly, the debates about consciousness revolve around dualism versus materialism. But this is not the right focus, given consciousness's intractability. The right focus is between those who believe that consciousness will one day be explained satisfactorily and those who deny that it will. The real debate, in other words, is over whether consciousness will occupy a unique place in the constellation of science, or whether standard science

will one day grow to enfold consciousness and make it understandable. In this book, we argue that consciousness occupies a unique place within science, and that, in a deep sense, consciousness will always remain beyond understanding. And this fact is due to an under-appreciated property of consciousness itself.

Yet understanding is somewhat like comfort: it is bred by familiarity. Since there will likely be a robust but nonexplanatory science of consciousness that will traffic in manipulations of various sorts, and since use begets familiarity, a kind of understanding of consciousness will grow – its deeper, more mysterious aspects will come to seem corralled . . . and that will be a kind of understanding. Which is good, because this will have to do. (We point out, too, that understanding why consciousness is in certain ways beyond understanding is itself a kind of understanding. This will add to our increasing sense that science is, over time, reigning in consciousness, and that we understand it.)

After working out all of this, we then realized that the nearly complete intractability of the problem of consciousness changes the way philosophers should understand philosophy. This may seem too big of a leap. Understanding consciousness is in part a philosophical problem because it involves basic, purely conceptual matters; there's a logic involved when wrestling with consciousness. But there is something else – an insight due to Thomas Nagel. The problem of consciousness involves attempting to reconcile two conflicting points of view: the subjective and the objective. And this attempted reconciliation is, according to Nagel, shared in common by *all* philosophy problems. The intractability property of consciousness says, basically, that the subjective point of view is logically irreducible to the objective. Assuming that going the other way – reducing the objective to the subjective – is also not in the cards, then the two are logically irreconcilable. If all philosophy problems are at bottom attempts to reconcile these two points of view, and they are irreconcilable in principle, then philosophy is a Sisyphean task. Or at the very least, philosophy has a Sisyphean component.

Philosophy, then, on our view, is not a set of deeply posed problems that we are solving, albeit slowly (glacially so). Instead, the persistence of the problems of philosophy emerges as a profound *epistemic* fact about humans. But not just humans. We argue that any conscious cognitive agent or being is going to be beset by these problems, and beset by them forever.

So, in short, we claim that the profound intractability of the problem of consciousness shows that fundamental philosophical mysteries of the universe are epistemological, rather than metaphysical. And this changes everything about how we should understand philosophy.

We argue for all this in this book. In Chapter 1, we frame the debate, altering it from the way it is usually laid out. We couch the discussion as a debate between *naturalists* and *mysterians*. Naturalists believe that there will one day be a robust, explanatory theory of consciousness; mysterians claim that science is virtually powerless in the face of consciousness. They are both wrong. In Part I, we argue that naturalism is wrong. In Part II, we argue that mysterianism is wrong. In the final part, we show how our approach to the problem of consciousness changes the debate in philosophy from metaphysics to epistemology.

Our goal in this book is to end fruitless debate about the metaphysical status of consciousness, and to clear the way for a decent science of consciousness by removing from it any guilt it may have at not explaining consciousness. Nothing can explain consciousness. So it can't be a failing of science that it can't explain it. The epistemic fact we have to come to terms with is that what lies at the core of our being, the core of our agenthood, is something that lies, not beyond the limit of our science, but beyond the limit of knowledge.