

Solving the Hard Problem of Consciousness

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Providing a scientific explanation of subjective experience has been elusive only because the nature of scientific explanation is poorly understood. One formulation of the hard problem of consciousness asks how it is that a bunch of chemicals squirting around in a human brain gives rise to subjective experience. Functional explanations involving neurological correlations often give rise to objections regarding certain gaps in our understanding. However, this should not be taken to mean that any such explanation is lacking. All scientific explanations contain a similar gap, yet, most of the things they attempt to explain are considered complete.

To make things clearer, let's take an example of a scientific explanation that is uncontroversial, such as fire. How is it that rubbing two sticks together gives rise to fire? The answer is well known, friction causes a reactant to heat up and eventually combine with an oxidant releasing more heat and light through an exothermic reaction. We can go deeper but the reader should get the point. This, like all scientific explanations, is only a description of observations, correlations. They don't explain anything in the sense that they uncover any necessary connections. There's no reason why oxidizing fuels should necessarily create a flame, they just do. Yet, this explanation is considered complete.

All explanations must end somewhere. We can always ask "Why?" in response to any explanation. If the scientific explanation of consciousness should be considered systematically incomplete then it is only because all scientific explanations should be considered systematically complete. Either there is no hard problem of consciousness or any other scientific explanation, or there is a problem with all scientific explanations. Either way, there is nothing especially difficult about explaining consciousness, which is what the hard problem purports to claim.