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Questioning Consciousness

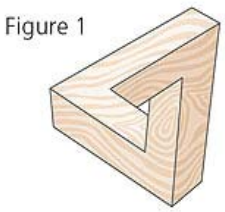
To understand consciousness and its evolution, we need to ask the right questions.

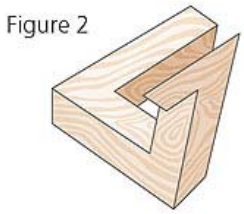
by **NICHOLAS HUMPHREY** • Posted January 28, 2008 04:57 PM

No one doubts that our experience of phenomenal consciousness—the felt redness of fire, the felt sweetness of a peach, the felt pain of a bee sting—arises from the activity of our brains. Yet the problem of explaining how this can be so seems to many theorists to be staggeringly hard. How can the wine of consciousness, the weird, ineffable, immaterial *qualia* that give such richness to subjective experience, conceivably arise from the water of the brain? As the philosopher Colin McGinn has put it, it's like trying to explain how you can get "numbers from biscuits, or ethics from rhubarb." The philosopher Jerry Fodor recently claimed, "The revisions of our concepts and theories that imagining a solution will eventually require are likely to be very deep and very unsettling."

Artwork by Jen Stark / Photograph by Harlan Erskine

If you smell theoretical panic, you're right. But are the scientific answers really so far out of reach? Have people been beguiled by the marvelous properties of consciousness into asking for the moon, while what is at issue is really much more down to earth? Everybody says they are waiting for the Big Idea. But perhaps the big idea should be that consciousness, which is of such significance to us subjectively, is scientifically not such a big deal.





It all depends on asking the right questions at the outset. I can show what I mean with the example of a well-known visual illusion. Consider what you might want to explain about the experience of looking at the object in the picture to the left (Fig. 1), a solid wooden version of the so-called impossible triangle. Since it is at first sight so surprising and impressive, any of us might very well innocently ask the (bad) question: "How can we explain the existence of this triangle as we perceive it?" Only later—indeed only once we have seen the object from a different viewpoint (Fig. 2), and realized that the "triangle as we perceive it" is an illusion—will it occur to us to ask the (good) question: "How can we explain the fact we have been tricked into perceiving it this way?"

Now, no one wants to think that consciousness is likewise some kind of trick. But let's nonetheless see where the analogy may lead. The standard philosopher's example is the case of what it's like to see red. So, suppose you were

looking at a ripe tomato: What might you want to explain about the qualia-rich red sensation that you are experiencing?

Since the qualia are indeed so up-front and remarkable, and since no one knows why this is, we are all, most probably, going to start off by asking what *may* be a bad question: "How can we explain the existence of these qualia as we experience them?" So here, again, it will only be if we undergo a radical shift in perspective and realize that the "qualia as we experience them" *could* be a *mental fantasy*, that we shall move on to asking what *may* be the good question: "How can we explain why we have the impression that such fantastic qualia exist even if they do not?" But, here is why it is likely to be so difficult to make this move: In the case of consciousness, we cannot simply change our perspective to see the solution. We are all stuck with the first-person point of view. So, the result is we persist with questing for the qualia as such.

Yet if consciousness is a trick, then of course this quest is a fool's errand. It will make no more sense to try to explain the existence of qualia than it would to explain the existence of the impossible triangle. What we should be doing instead is trying to explain just how we have been *set up*—and why.

Well, *is* it a trick? The only way to find out, I'd say, would be to take seriously the idea that consciousness is a trick, and think through what further questions would follow at a scientific level. And, though I realize I should not go overboard with the analogy, I believe the impossible triangle can continue to show the way.

A philosophical term comes in useful here. When people perceive, think, believe, and so on, these mental states are called "intentional states;" whatever the particular state is *about*—the percept, thought, belief—is called the "intentional object." So, when we look at the wooden triangle from the special position, what we perceive—the impossible triangle—is the "intentional object." Meanwhile, the thing we are actually *looking* at can be called the "real-world object."

So, now, with phenomenal consciousness, let's see if we cannot make a similar distinction. Suppose that, when we are conscious of having a sensation, when we say it's *like something*—it's *like* seeing red—this thing it is like is the "intentional object of consciousness." Then, if this is in any way similar to the case of the triangle, there will be a corresponding real-world object—presumably something going on in the brain—which is what we are actually engaging with and commenting on. In which case, there will indeed be another series of questions to ask.

1. What exactly is the real-world brain activity that we are engaging with when we say a sensation is like something?

2. Why does this activity have the (tricky) properties it has, such that our experience of it is seemingly something so strangely private, not of this world, and indescribable in common terms?

3. What makes this trick work? How is it done?

4. What is the point? Why was it designed like this? What might have been the evolutionary advantage of our having these marvelous experiences?

I believe we can already propose plausible answers to each of these questions—although they are all quite radical. Here they are.

The real-world brain activity is the activity that I call "sentition." In response to sensory stimulation, we react with an evolutionarily ancient form of internalized bodily expression (something like an inner grimace or smile). We then experience this as *sensation*
when we form an inner picture—by monitoring the command signals—of just what we are doing.

Sentition has been subtly shaped in the course of evolution so as to instill our picture of it with those added dimensions of phenomenality. Sentition has, in short, become what I call a "phenomenous object"—defined as "something that when monitored by introspection seems to have phenomenal properties."

I do not pretend to know yet how this is done, or what the neural correlate of phenomenous sentition is. My hunch is that feedback loops in the sensory areas of the brain are creating complex attractor states that require more than the usual four dimensions to describe—and that this makes these "states of mind" seem to have immaterial qualities. But you do not need to understand what I have just said to get the message. Creating a thing that *gives the illusion* of having weird and wonderful properties need be no great shakes, and is certainly much easier than creating something that actually has them, especially when it is possible to restrict the point of view.

There is every reason
to think the truth about consciousness will eventually be discovered by scientific investigation. Even so, I'd flag a potential difficulty in getting there. If sentition appears phenomenal only when observed from the specific first-person viewpoint, this is bound to create major difficulties for those neuroscientists who hope to find the neural correlate of consciousness (the NCC) by studying the brain from the outside. For the reality will likely be that seen from outside, the NCC will strike the observer as nothing special, merely an oddity—just as would happen if we were to come across an impossible triangle lying on a bench, without realizing what it has been *designed* to do.

The final challenge will be explaining the biological purpose of all this. We can surely assume that the kind of

development I have sketched above will not have happened accidentally. It must be the result of natural selection favoring genes that underwrite the specialized neural circuits—whatever they turn out to be—that do indeed sustain the illusion of qualia, giving rise to the magical mystery show observed by the first-person. And it is axiomatic that this will only have happened if those lucky enough to be spectators of this show have somehow been at an advantage in terms of biological survival. Yet, how can this be if, as is widely assumed by theorists, the phenomenal richness of consciousness is of *no practical value whatsoever*?

Fodor has stated this aspect of the problem bluntly: "There are several reasons why consciousness is so baffling. For one thing, it seems to be among the chronically unemployed. What mental processes can be performed only because the mind is conscious, and what does consciousness contribute to their performance? As far as anybody knows, anything that our conscious minds can do they could do just as well if they weren't conscious. Why then did God bother to make consciousness?"

Fodor is undoubtedly asking the right question: "Why did God—or rather natural selection—make consciousness?" Yet I'd suggest the reason he finds it all so baffling is that he is starting off with the completely wrong premise, for he has assumed, as indeed almost everyone else does, that phenomenal consciousness must be providing us with some kind of new *skill*. In other words, it must be helping us do something that we can do *only* by virtue of being conscious, in the way that, say, a bird can fly *only* because it has wings, or you can understand this sentence *only* because you know English.

Yet I want to suggest the role of phenomenal consciousness may not be like this at all. Its role may not be to *enable* us to do something we *could not* do otherwise, but rather to *encourage* us to do something we *would not* do otherwise: to make us *take an interest* in things that otherwise would not interest us, or *to mind* things we otherwise would not mind, or *to set ourselves goals* we otherwise would not set.

To test this idea we will need evidence as to how being phenomenally conscious changes our worldview: What beliefs and attitudes flow from it? What changes occur in the way conscious individuals think about who and what they are?

These are empirical questions that can be answered only by careful fieldwork in the realm of conscious creatures. What is needed is a thorough natural history of consciousness, and it must be a program of research in which we are ready to consider all sorts of possibilities—not just those we would expect to find discussed in the science or philosophy section of the library, but perhaps those that belong in the Self Help section, or even Mind and Spirit.

Regrettably, this area of consciousness studies has been neglected by scientists (although artists have been involved with it since art began). I cannot claim to be more than an amateur myself. All the same, I will not hold back from telling you my own main conclusion from a lifetime's interest in what consciousness *does*. I may shock you by what may seem the naivety of my conclusion (I've shocked myself): I think the plain and simple fact is that consciousness—on various levels—*makes life more worth living*.

We like *being* phenomenally conscious. We like *the world* in which we're phenomenally conscious. We like *ourselves* for being phenomenally conscious. And the resulting *joie de vivre*, the enchantment with the world we live in, and the enhanced sense of our own metaphysical importance have, in the course of evolutionary history, turned our lives around.

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