

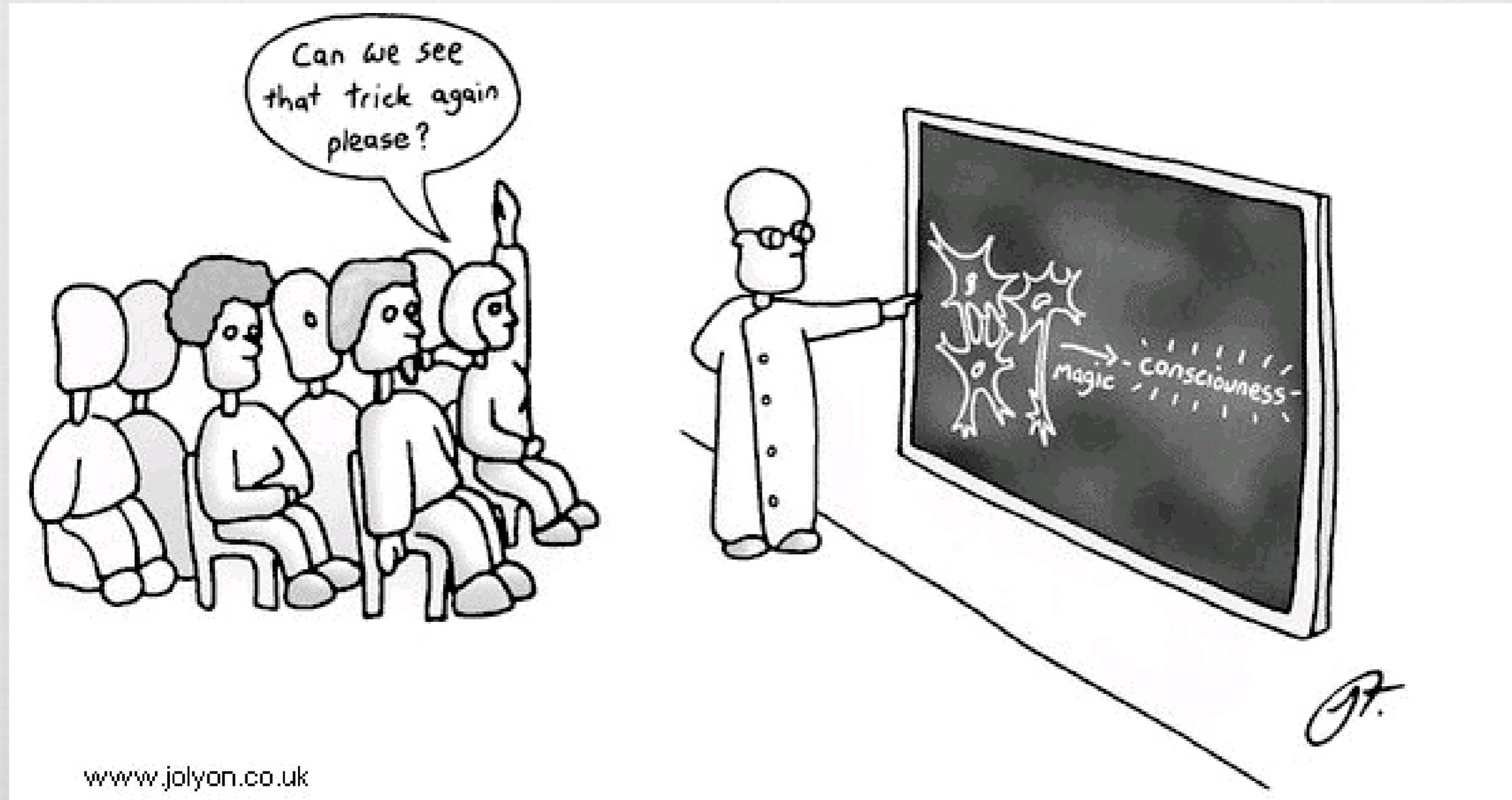
Consciousness (cont.)

Phil 255

The 'hard' problem

- The hard problem is the mind-body problem
- Terminology due to renewed interest in Nagel's concerns from David Chalmers
- The 'easy' problem (which isn't so easy)
 - giving a scientific account of the physical, neural mechanisms for each and every kind of consciousness
- The 'hard' problem
 - explaining how consciousness arises from this physical substrate ("it is these phenomena [i.e. sound of an oboe, agony of pain, etc.] that pose the real mystery of the mind")

The hard problem



McGinn: "We want to take the magic out of the link between consciousness and the brain"

The hard problem

- One question that has been asked is:
 - “what phenomena?” (Dennett asks this often).
- Thought experiments have been presented to get the problem to seem more compelling.
 - ‘Mary the colour scientist’: can’t solve the problem
 - Having objective information might not be sufficient for explaining qualia (recall Nagel)
- Concerns:
 - emotional significance of ‘new knowledge’ might not tell us anything ‘deep’ about the subject matter

Chalmers' solution

- Dual-aspect theory in which, instead of God, the fundamental stuff is information
- This solution suffers from a dilemma:
 - Either everything is conscious and physical (the two aspects)
 - Or only some things are conscious (which means we still have to explain which ones and why)
- Other concerns:
 - If we are to be monists, why not be materialists?
 - What does it mean to say information is a substance?
 - If this is true then there are no causal relations between minds and brains

McGinn



- Can we solve the mind body problem?
 - McGinn: “no and therefore yes”
- McGinn is interested in showing that this magical link between consciousness and the brain is impenetrable

Past solutions

- Constructive solutions
 - (e.g. functionalism), suggest a property which is satisfied by both brain states and mental states
 - McGinn: “this property is supposed to explain how conscious states can come from brain states”
- Supernatural solutions
 - Historically dominant (e.g. Cartesian dualism, preestablished harmony, etc.)
 - McGinn: these solutions are as extreme as the problem itself
- Neither work, even though there is a solution

Cognitive closure

- McGinn has to say what he means by our inability to construct a solution to some problem
 - He introduces the notion of cognitive closure
 - Begins by explaining perceptual closure
 - Moves 'easily' from one to the other (p. 274)
- Suggests cognitive closure does not imply
 - 'Irrealism' of a property
 - Inability to appreciate a related problem

Problem

- 'Argument from ignorance'
 - Claiming there is no proof for T, therefore T is false
 - This works both ways (i.e. there is no proof for 'not-T' therefore T is true)
- Strictly, this is a 'logical fallacy', but is used often in science.
- Does McGinn use it correctly?

Absolute vs. relative CC

- A problem is absolutely cognitively closed if there is no possible mind that could result
- It is relatively closed if some minds could in principle solve it while other minds couldn't.
- McGinn is arguing that the mind body problem is probably absolutely closed
 - if he is right about concept formation, no mind will be capable of understanding how it relates to its own body
 - If there is a "radical" mind that somehow understands the mind body relation in a priori way perhaps it could solve the problem
 - McGinn suspects there is no such mind

Argument for CC

- There exists some natural property of the brain that accounts for consciousness
 - McGinn steadfastly wants to be a materialist.
 - He adopts the analogy of life (notes that we don't take life as a primitive brute fact nor do we explain it by miracle, rather we provide an account of how life comes from matter)
 - Hence, consciousness (being biological) must be some organization of matter (some property P) that when realized ensures the systems or object having P is conscious.

Argument for CC

- McGinn starts by suggesting the very weak thesis that it is at least “possible” that we could never arrive at a grasp of P.
- Logically speaking, he cannot conclude that just because it is possible that we can't understand P that we won't understand P
- Suggests long-standing historical failure is suggestive of closure
 - Is it?
 - Cognitive closure about God (good analogy?)
- McGinn considers the two ways we have tried to identify P, and attempts to show that each has failed (and will do so in the future).

Direct investigation of P

- We have “immediate access” to the properties of consciousness
 - Perhaps we can solve the problem through introspection
 - But, do not have access to the nature of the link
- Analysis of the concepts that we used to discuss conscious experience will not give us access to P
 - Reflecting on the concept “life” wouldn’t have helped us
 - Therefore introspection is closed wrt P (as most things are)
- “Familiar point” that you can’t have concepts of conscious properties unless you instantiate them
 - Won’t understand P because “our concepts of consciousness just are inherently constrained by our own form of consciousness”

Problems

- But what about concepts that appear in ordinary theories like 'mass' and 'gravity'?
- We have no independent of these outside theories they are part of
- It's not clear what link there is between the "nature" and "character" of experiences such that one necessarily follows from the other (p. 279)
- It is clear unclear what McGinn means by "one's form of subjectivity restricts one's concepts of subjectivity".
- Surely, we can have some concepts of things we never experience (e.g. unicorns)

Studying the brain

- McGinn takes it as “obvious” that consciousness is not an observable property of the brain
 - What is it for something to be an ‘observable property’?
 - Or, what is it for a property to be ‘noumenal’ wrt perception of an object that instantiates it?
 - Observable how? At all? From a point of view?
 - Future fMRI?
- McGinn: we will “always be baffled about how it could give rise to consciousness”
- Like Descartes, he claims “consciousness does not seem made up of smaller spatial processes”

Studying the brain

- Perhaps we can grant him perceptual closure
 - Does that lead to cognitive closure?
 - McGinn: yes because “inference to the best explanation of purely physical data will never take us outside the realm of the physical”
 - Question begging
- Contrasting view: that it merely seems as if the mind body problem isn't explicable, though it isn't really
 - Comparison to an object accessed through sight and sound
 - Responds with several questions and the conclusion: “I think this suggestion is not enough to account for the miraculous appearance of the link”

No philosophical problem

- Odd situation here: claims that although we could never have access to the solution to the mind body problem, there is one.
- Since there is a solution, there is no philosophical (i.e. metaphysical) problem about P (it's just a physical property after all)
- Strangeness: How could McGinn know/demonstrate this?
- Nevertheless, we get "we can rest secured in the knowledge that some (unknowable) property of the brain make everything fall into place."

Discussion

- His arguments depend on intuitions, poor analogies, lack of imagination, or question begging.
- Perhaps this is ok because:
 - “I want simply to offer a diagnosis of what is going on what one finds oneself assailed with his flurry of conflicting intuitions”
 - or “if the thesis is actually true, it will still strike us as hard to believe”
- Perhaps not (then what should we demand as a demonstration of this view?)

Lyons' solution

- Suggests that the distinction between 'knowing how' and 'knowing why' can help solve the problems
- He says that knowing how something works (building it) is a can lead to many 'knowing why' insights.
- Example: 'why don't railway lines buckle in the heat?'
 - Answered by describing knowledge how
 - Consciousness: once we get an understanding of the complex parts, and their interaction, we will have knowledge of why they can generate consciousness
- So, while Lyons suggests that there may be an element of the 'hard' problem remaining after solving the easy problem this isn't new (e.g. heat and kinetic energy)