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No help on the hard problem

Commentary on [Reber](#) on *Origins of Mind*

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Abstract: The hard problem of consciousness is to explain why certain physical states are conscious: why do they feel the way they do, rather than some other way or no way at all? Arthur Reber (2016) claims to solve the hard problem. But he does not: even if we grant that amoebae are conscious, we can ask why such organisms feel the way they do, and Reber's theory provides no answer. Still, Reber's theory may be methodologically useful: we do not yet have a satisfactory theory of consciousness, but perhaps the study of simple minds is a way to go about finding one.

Keywords: consciousness, hard problem, simple minds, cellular basis of consciousness, methodology

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When we speak of *conscious* mental states, we are speaking of states that there is something it *feels like* to be in. Entities that are conscious have experiences, an inner life; things feel, look, smell a certain way to them. Consciousness strikes many as an extremely puzzling phenomenon. We can – at least in principle, and in many cases in practice – explain how information about our environments is processed in our brains, and how such neurobiological goings-on result in the movements of our bodies. But why do these processes feel the way they do? Why do they feel any way at all? Why “is all this processing accompanied by an experienced inner life?” (Chalmers 1996, p. xii). To answer these questions would be to solve the *hard problem of consciousness*.

Arthur Reber (2016) purports to give such an answer. The canonical statement of Reber's theory (the “Cellular Basis of Consciousness,” or CBC) is that “Mind and consciousness are not unique features of human brains. They are grounded in inherent features present in simpler forms in virtually every species. Any organism with flexible cell walls, a sensitivity to its surrounds and the capacity for locomotion will possess the biological foundations of mind and consciousness” (p. 4). However, at least two clarifications of this statement are in order. First, Reber is not just claiming that single-cell organisms have some features that ground, or are the foundation of,

consciousness in more sophisticated creatures. He is claiming that single-cell organisms are conscious: they “feel pain” (p. 8), “instantiate subjectivity” (p. 9). Second, this is not to be understood as merely the claim that consciousness is associated with having flexible cell walls (perhaps as a matter of natural law); instead, Reber is making an *ontological* claim, a claim incompatible with dualism: that consciousness just is a biological feature.

1. Reber on The Hard Problem

This second point is key to understanding Reber’s approach to the hard problem. On his view, the hard problem is “the result of a category error” (p. 5); the error is thinking of consciousness as an “added’ element” rather than “an inherent component of organic form.” So Reber’s idea seems to be that once we see that consciousness is nothing “ontologically novel,” we will see that it makes no sense to ask “Why does this state feel the way it does? Why does it feel any way at all?”

This is a surprising claim. The idea that conscious states are identical to neurobiological states – not an added element, not ontologically novel – has been well known at least since the 1950s. (The *loci classici* are Place (1956) and Smart (1959).) Proponents of this idea are rejecting precisely the supposed category error that Reber claims to be the source of the hard problem. But it nonetheless seems to make perfectly good sense to ask someone who claims that pain just is a certain neurobiological state: “Why does that state feel painful, rather than some other way or no way at all?” And one can easily pose the same questions for Reber’s view. Let’s agree for the sake of argument that there is something it feels like to be a bacterium. Why? Why do bacteria feel the way they do, rather than some other way or no way at all? As far as I can tell, Reber does not even attempt to answer these questions. But until we have an answer, we do not have a solution (or even a “(re)solution”) to the hard problem.

It is sometimes suggested that identity claims require no explanation, and that realizing this solves or removes the hard problem (Papineau, 1993; Block & Stalnaker, 1999). Perhaps this is what Reber has in mind. It is hard to see how this style of response to the hard problem could motivate the CBC over physicalist alternatives. But in any case, there is a sense in which many identities can be explained (Block, 2003; Chalmers & Jackson, 2001): for example, we can explain how it could be the case that water just is H₂O, because we can see how aggregates of H₂O molecules would have the familiar features we associate with water. But when we consider putative identities between conscious states and physical states, the hard problem rears its head: it strikes most of us as difficult to see how it could be the case that pain just is some neurobiological feature. If it is to answer the hard problem, Reber must be able to say how it could be that to have a flexible cell wall, a sensitivity to one’s surrounds and the capacity for locomotion is the same thing as having a felt inner life. Again, I see no answer in Reber’s target article. Of course, there are a variety of familiar responses to the hard problem in the literature: for example, perhaps our puzzlement at the hard problem is a result of special features of our ways of thinking about experiences that do not illuminate their fundamental nature (Tye, 2000; Block, 2003). Reber could in principle take one of these views on board. But doing so would do

no credit to the CBC; to the extent that such responses work, they would work for any physicalist.

2. The Cellular Basis of Consciousness Considered as a Research Strategy

There is an additional component of Reber's thought about the hard problem: Reber claims that one source of our puzzlement is the apparent difficulty of ascertaining "where along the species continuum this mind-thing appears and what are the neural organizational properties that allow it" (p. 5). He claims that his view lets us stop worrying about this question, and "redirect the focus toward understanding how particular kinds of basic, primitive organic forms came to have the bio-sensitivity that is the foundation of subjectivity" (pp. 5-6).

It is hard to see how the difficulty of determining the cut-off between those entities that are conscious and those that are not could be the primary source of the hard problem. After all, those who claim that pain just is a certain neurobiological feature purport to have found the point of cutoff; as we have seen, the hard problem remains. If anything, the lack of any good answer to the hard problem gives us some reason to doubt that the cutoff has been located correctly; why should we believe that (say) only those with firing c-fibers have pain if we have no idea why firing c-fibers matter? Likewise for Reber's view: He purports to give a principled point of cutoff. But until he can tell us *why* consciousness is what he claims, we have little reason to believe that the cutoff is where he says.

Nonetheless, Reber's advice – *stop worrying and study simple forms of bio-sensitivity* – may be good methodology. As Reber observes, we have learned a great deal from studying non-human minds, including the "minds" of very simple creatures; perhaps some clue to consciousness lies here as well. I don't think that the CBC offers any insight into the hard problem. But perhaps it gives us some insight about where to look.

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