

What should we expect from a solution to the “hard problem of consciousness”? A historical perspective

Paolo Pecere (University of Cassino)

Abstract

One of the most debated issues in the literature on the “hard problem of consciousness” is how a scientific theory should be in order to provide a satisfactory solution. In this paper I suggest a reappraisal of this question in the light of a debate that has already taken place at the end of the XIXth Century.

Tennant (2007) has suggested that contemporary themes in the philosophy of mind had already found a «reasonably complete expression» in XIXth century Germany. This is also true of the “hard problem”. In fact, I show that the problem is formulated in strikingly similar terms (and with strikingly similar thought experiments) by the leading physiologist Emil du Bois-Reymond (1872). Du Bois-Reymond’s thesis that we will not ever solve the problem has been considered as an early analogous of McGinn’s “mysterianism” (Tye 1999). But a closer analysis shows that it presents a different argument, which is worth of reconsideration.

Du Bois Reymond does not appeal to a limit in our cognitive faculties (as does McGinn), but rather considers scientific knowledge as intrinsically unfit to provide an explanation of «how» phenomenal consciousness arises from its neural correlates. His argument closely resembles Chalmers’ (2002) “Structure and Dynamics” argument: scientific descriptions just include structure (e.g. spatio-temporal variables) and dynamics (laws about these variables), and thus cannot explain subjective experience. Contrary to Chalmers, however, du Bois-Reymond believes that the detection of neural correlates is scientifically satisfactory and that we should not derive from its limits a need to reevaluate metaphysical hypotheses. I will illustrate his claim by showing that such a resort to metaphysics was quite common and unfruitful in XIXth Century Germany. This story can serve to consider the epistemic advantages and risks involved in setting a standard for a scientific theory of consciousness.

References

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