

Consciousness

As to the Other Minds problem, it can be argued not only from analogy but from homology that other people have minds. The phylogenetic perspective that allows other minds to be homologized yields them as the null hypothesis, placing onto radical solipsism the burden of proving that they do not exist.

This writer considers the qualia issue to be the most puzzling of scientific problems, much more so than the origins of the universe or of life. Human consciousness should be a less difficult puzzle than nonhuman consciousness because humans can study the phenomenon from both sides and work toward the middle.

Daniel Dennett's program involves warning of the dangers of compound questions and maximally demystifying consciousness by discharging "homunculi" in a finite regress. He asserts that the mind is a pseudo-linear virtual machine implemented on a parallel architecture, functioning as the brain's user illusion of itself. As noted in an earlier essay, Dennett observes that while Paley said that life required intelligent design, Darwin showed that the natural design process involved the delegation of this work to nonintelligent agents. The efficient, instrumental causes of natural design are unconscious, unintelligent and without foresight. Similarly, Dennett argues, the work of consciousness may be thought of as being distributed among such agents. Central coordination is unnecessary and may even preclude emergent phenomena, an example of which Dennett considers consciousness to be.

The human body is adequate but vulnerable and ephemeral. For Hamlet, "to say we end the heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wisht." The strong version of artificial intelligence offers an opportunity for a nonfatal alternative. The goal (what Daniel Sarewitz calls "techno-optimism") is to create competent robotic agents (*machina sapiens*) that cannot suffer uncontrollably, especially if other fields such as medicine and politics are unable to end *unjust* suffering. Organizational invariance should allow the implementation of consciousness on a nonbiological platform more robust than the human body, yielding what Ray Kurzweil calls "posthumans." (Recall that John von Neumann proved that a universal Turing machine can simulate any computer, limited only by speed.)

Proponents of manned space exploration say that humans are better for the job than machines. By the time men get to Mars, this may longer be true. Even now, humans are not universally intelligent. For example, people attempting to express insouciance via phrases such as "Me and her could care less" fail this writer's version of the Turing Test. (The *Dilbert* cartoon of 3/16/09 concludes with the title character yelling at his boss, "Stop failing the Turing test!")

In Steve Moore's *In the Bleachers* cartoon of 10/2/05, a referee says to a boxer, "How do you spell 'phlegm'? Who is the inventor of the crescent wrench? Where is the capital of Lithuania? What is the Latin derivation of the word 'fungus'? Fight's over! He can't go on. He was unable to answer even one question correctly."

In the *Calvin & Hobbes* cartoon by Bill Watterson, 12/7/05, Calvin asks, "If computers can think, what will people be better at than machines?" Hobbes answers, "Irrational behavior."

Hopes for extraterrestrial life must be tempered with caution. Looking at the stars, Scottish Philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) remarked, "A sad spectacle. If they be inhabited, what a scope for misery and folly. If they be not inhabited, what a waste of space."

This writer has found the following useful:

Consciousness Explained. 1991. Daniel C. Dennett. Little, Brown and Company. ISBN 0-316-18066-1

The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory. 1996. David J. Chalmers. Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-511789-1