

No Materialist Theory of Consciousness Is Plausible

Eric Holloway

Consciousness is the biggest problem for materialism. How is it possible that a bunch of particles that are devoid of consciousness get together and cause consciousness?

One proposed solution is that all particles are conscious. But, in that case, why am I a human instead of a particle? The vast majority of conscious beings in the universe would be particles, and so it is most likely I'd be a particle and not any sort of organic life form.

Another solution is that certain structures become conscious. But a structure is an abstract entity and there is an untold infinite number of abstract entities. In that case, the conscious particle problem becomes even worse. Why do I even physically exist; why am I not a conscious abstract entity? The probability of my physical existence is the number of physical things (finite) divided by the number of abstract things (infinite). Because a finite quantity divided by infinity has a probability of zero, it becomes mathematically impossible for me to physically exist. Something's not right here...

These proposed explanations of consciousness are called *panpsychism*: To explain why human beings are conscious, we say everything is conscious. While that is a logical possibility, it leads to the very strange outcome that our own conscious existence becomes incredibly unlikely or mathematically impossible.

Another proposed solution to the problem of consciousness is to say that it is an illusion (*illusionism*). But, if we are allowed to "solve" the problem that way, all problems can be solved by denying them. Again, that is an unsatisfying approach that 'explains' by explaining away.

This brings us at last to a currently popular approach to consciousness: emergence. Some say consciousness is an *emergent property* of a complex structure of matter. This solution is a bit more plausible because it can at least account for the seeming correlation we see between complex organic beings and consciousness.

However, beyond that, problems develop. At what point is a structure complex enough to become conscious? If we take away one particle from that structure then it must cease to be conscious. Likewise, there must be unconscious structures where the addition of a single particle causes them to suddenly become conscious. This also seems weird. But if we say there is no such "one particle" transition point, then no matter how many particles we remove from the structure, it must remain conscious—even to the point where there is only a single particle left. At which point, we are back to a conscious particle model, where at least some particles must be inherently conscious. And these particles must be fundamental, they cannot be built from other material objects otherwise we are back at the emergent consciousness model.

So, where do the conscious particles come from? They either must have existed since the very beginning, on their own accord (since nothing else can create them) or they pop in and out of existence randomly. I know that I certainly have not existed since the Big Bang, so that

disproves the first option. The second option is possible but our existence seems to be highly predictable (it correlates with existence of biological organisms), though not constant (organisms die), and certainly not random. A conscious particle model can be a viable idea only if the conscious particles are brought in and out of existence by a nonrandom cause that transcends the material universe. But, in that case, we are no longer dealing with a purely material theory of consciousness because the source of the conscious particles cannot itself be material.

We see why there is no coherent material theory of consciousness, at least not among the current theories out there: panpsychism, illusionism, and emergence. All such theories either deny the very thing they are trying to explain, result in absurd scenarios, or end up requiring an immaterial intervention.

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