Metaphysics & Consciousness

A talk by Larry Muhlstein
A brief note on philosophy

It is about thinking
So think about what I am saying and ask me questions

And go home and think some more
For self improvement (and because this will be the main content of your midterm)
The content of this presentation

This presentation includes:
- The thought of others:
  - Koch, Churchland, Baars, Dennett, Chalmers, Aristotle, etc.
- My thought
- Some scientific work
- But none of these are the “right answer” necessarily!
Classical metaphysics

That which is beyond the reach of physics and scientific inquiry
Accessed through reason and thought
Classically includes things like:
- Basic components of the world
- Causality
- Existence
P C’s empirical metaphysics

Not yet understood in terms of scientific inquiry
Not classified by the subject matter, but by the state of progress in science
More on P Churchland’s metaphysics

She discusses genes, evolution, selective pressures, the importance of predictive abilities on the part of the organism, etc. These are to demonstrate the ability of science to answer some questions once accessible only to metaphysical reasoning.
Which brings us to the relation between science and philosophy

- What is science (really)?
- What is philosophy (really)?
- And, for the sake of completeness, what is mathematics (really)?

Note: this is only one way to divide the space
More Patricia Churchland

Split brain patients and their split mental lives
No positive claims for dualists, only negative ones i.e. the soul is not. But no evidence of what the soul is...

Blind-sight phenomena where there is no conscious perception, but where there is cognitive effect (p.182)
Consciousness Starting from Descartes

Cogito ergo sum

Mind and body
The core concepts involved

Body
Mind
Physical
Phenomenal (subjective, qualia, etc.)

Consciousness
The philosophical problem and the scientific problem

One way to divide the space that brings out many of the important distinctions

Scientific problem(s)    [“Easy” problem]
Philosophical problem    [“Hard” problem]
{Says Muhlstein}         {Says Chalmers}
More core concepts

Monism
Dualism

Mentalism/idealism
Physicalism/materialism
Dualism (many kinds)
The philosophical problem

Qualia (subjective phenomena):

How does the physical world relate to the phenomenal?

Is there even a phenomenal?
Chalmers’ Thoughts

The first person perspective
How can we explain the subjective in terms of the objective?
Correlations vs. explanations
Easy vs. hard problems
Different forms of consciousness
Philosophical zombies
Are you conscious when you are dreaming?
Is consciousness awareness?
Is it self-control / “free will?”
Is it subjective phenomena?

Notice that “consciousness” has many senses - awareness is related but not equivalent to other notions of consciousness
The scientific problem

- Neural correlates of consciousness
- What is the basis of conscious activity?
- Why does information manifest as conscious and other information manifest as unconscious
- Other testable predictions
Baars’ views

Treat consciousness as a variable:
- If two processes have the same information, what is the difference between consciousness and unconscious presentations of that information?

The visual cortex is like a staircase:
- Information is processed and added as you ascend
- Things become conscious at the top
Dennett’s views

Consciousness as having a “point of view”
Abandoning intuitions
On the “zombie hunch”
Consciousness isn’t as much as we think
No cartesian theatre
Necessary features

(according to Koch):
- Proper blood supply, functional brainstem MRF, acetylcholine, etc
- But can things other than biochemical beings be conscious? Why should this be a unique property of these beings?
- Multiple-realizability
Basis of conscious activity

- Neural?
- Physical?
- Informational?
- Something else entirely?
- Metaphysical?
- From a deity?
Thank you!

I hope I have convinced you, if nothing else, that these are not simple problems.

And I hope I have convinced you to think more about them.
Questions?