

this view (“eliminative materialism”), mental events don’t exist at all, and the common folk psychology based on minds and mental activity is fundamentally mistaken. However, most of us find it difficult to believe that our mind is a figment of our imagination! A more plausible version is that we will eventually find a way to explain all psychological experiences in purely physical terms.

- **mentalism:** the view that only the mind really exists and that the physical world could not exist unless some mind were aware of it. It is not easy to test this idea—go ahead and try!—but few philosophers or scientists take it seriously.
- **identity position:** the view that mental processes are the same thing as certain kinds of brain processes but are described in different terms. In other words, the universe has only one kind of substance, but it includes both material and mental aspects. By analogy, one could describe the *Mona Lisa* as an extraordinary painting of a woman with a subtle smile, or one could list the exact color and brightness of each point on the painting. Although the two descriptions appear very different, they refer to the same object. According to the identity position, every mental experience is a brain activity, even though descriptions of thoughts sound very different from descriptions of brain activities. For example, the fright you feel when someone threatens you is the same thing as a certain pattern of activity in your brain.

Note how the definition of the identity position is worded. It does not say that the mind is the brain. Mind is brain activity. In the same sense, fire is not really a “thing.” Fire is what is happening to something. Similarly, mental activity is what is happening in the brain.

Can we be sure that monism is correct? No. However, we adopt it as the most reasonable working hypothesis. That is, we conduct research on the assumption of monism and see how far we can go. As you will find throughout this text, experiences and brain activities appear inseparable. Stimulation of any brain area provokes an experience, and any experience evokes brain activity. You can still use terms like *mind* or *mental activity* if you make it clear that you regard these terms as describing an aspect of brain activity. However, if you lapse into using *mind* to mean a ghostlike something that is neither matter nor energy, don’t underestimate the scientific and philosophical arguments that can be marshaled against you (Dennett, 1991).

(Does a belief in monism mean that we are lowering our evaluation of minds? Maybe not. Maybe we are elevating our concept of the material world.)

Even if we accept the monist position, however, we have done little more than restate the mind–brain problem. The questions remain: Why is consciousness a property of brain activity? Is it important or just an accident, like the noises a machine makes? What kind

of brain activity produces consciousness? How does it produce consciousness? And what is consciousness, anyway? (You may have noted the lack of a definition. A firm, clear definition of consciousness is elusive. The same is true for many other terms that we feel comfortable using. For example, you know what *time* means, but can you define it?)

The function (if any) of consciousness is far from obvious. Several psychologists have argued that many nonhuman species also have consciousness because their behavior is so complex and adaptive that we cannot explain it without assuming consciousness (e.g., Griffin, 2001). Others have argued that even if other animals are conscious, their consciousness explains nothing. Consciousness may not be a useful scientific concept (Wynne, 2004). Indeed, because we cannot observe consciousness, none of us knows for sure even that other people are conscious, much less other species. According to the position known as **solipsism** (*SOL-i-p-sizm*, based on the Latin words *solus* and *ipse*, meaning “alone” and “self”), I alone exist, or I alone am conscious. Other people are either like robots or like the characters in a dream. (Solipsists don’t form organizations because each is convinced that all other solipsists are wrong!) Although few people take solipsism seriously, it is hard to imagine evidence to refute it. The difficulty of knowing whether other people (or animals) have conscious experiences is known as the **problem of other minds**.

David Chalmers (1995) has proposed that in discussions of consciousness we distinguish between what he calls the **easy problems** and the **hard problem**. The **easy problems** pertain to many phenomena that we call **consciousness**, such as the difference between wakefulness and sleep and the mechanisms that enable us to focus our attention. These issues pose all the usual difficulties of any scientific question but no philosophical problems. In contrast, the **hard problem** concerns why and how any kind of brain activity is associated with consciousness. As Chalmers (1995) put it, “Why doesn’t all this information-processing go on ‘in the dark,’ free of any inner feel?” (p. 203). That is, why does brain activity *feel* like anything at all? Many scientists (Crick & Koch, 2004) and philosophers (Chalmers, 2004) agree that we have no way to answer that question, at least at present. We don’t even have a clear hypothesis to test. The best we can do is determine what brain activity is necessary or sufficient for consciousness. After we do so, maybe we will see a way to explain why that brain activity is associated with consciousness, or maybe we won’t.¹

¹Note the phrasing “is associated with consciousness,” instead of “leads to consciousness” or “causes consciousness.” According to the identity position, brain activity does not cause or lead to consciousness any more than consciousness leads to brain activity. Each is the same as the other.

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