Exploring Philosophy
The Problem of Consciousness

Winifred
I'm Winifred Robinson. In this audio recording I'm talking to Tim Crane, who is a Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge University and Carolyn Price, a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the Open University. We are talking about consciousness. For many people consciousness is one of the great puzzles and I suppose one way of looking at it might be this that on the one hand we seem to be just material objects, flesh and blood. On the other hand our conscious experiences seem to be so vivid and so Technicolor and the question is how material stuff, flesh and blood, can give rise to this vivid and exciting conscious life. So Tim can you give us any insights into how a physical explanation of consciousness might go or even where you might start to look.

Tim Crane
Well the way that physicalists start to thinking about these things is that they – they try and identify which parts of the brain are responsible for which kinds of experiences. In fact quite a lot is know about which parts of the brain are responsible for what kinds of mental activity people know where the visual part of the brain is for example and the visual cortex at the back of the head. What the physicalists try to do is to identify what they call the neural correlate of consciousness. So something that is correlated in the brain with a particular kind of conscious experience. And this is why physicalists are very excited by MRI scans, you know, which show which parts of the brain are activated when someone say for example thinks about ice cream. The difficulty with this is in what way does it count as an explanation of consciousness. Supposing I can find that whenever I think about ice cream and I imagine tasting ice cream that a particular part of my brain is activated. Supposing someone wanted to know what it was like to think about ice cream? They couldn't know that just by knowing which part of my brain was activated if they'd never known what thinking about ice cream was like. So there seems to be a gap. There seems to be a gap between what we know about the brain even if we knew lots more about the brain than we did and what we know about what it's actually like to have a conscious experience. So if the physicalists idea is that you simply identify something in the brain that's correlated with a conscious experience that doesn't tell you in itself what is like and therefore in that way doesn't explain it.

Winifred
So ice cream - I understand that by explaining the neurological pathways. I can't account for the or explain the experience of ice cream. Any other examples?

Tim Crane
Well I think a vivid example was given by Bertrand Russell many, many years ago when he said that a blind person could know the whole of physics but there's something that people with sight know which the blind do not namely what it's like to see something. So imagine that there was a blind person who knew all about the brain and knew everything that there was about the basis of vision in the brain, even if they knew all that there's still something that they couldn't explain which was what it's like to see something.

Winifred
Carolyn, how would you answer that question?

Carolyn Price
I agree with Tim that it's difficult to imagine how a physicalist about consciousness could explain how we are going to get a very immediate or intuitive understanding of what conscious experiences are like just by looking at all the physicalist facts. But I think what we might hope for would be some theory of consciousness that would enable us to understand something about why conscious experiences are like what they're like, even if we couldn't

have a simple and intuitive jump from the physical – physicalist theory to – to the description of conscious states. And the analogy I would make would be with physics. These days physicists tell us that what underlies the physical objects that we bump into around the house is something really quite strange and peculiar and they can have a mathematical understanding of that. But it's quite difficult to get an intuitive grasp of how you can jump from quarks and electrons to tables and chairs.

Winifred
Carolyn when do you think we might be able to build a conscious machine

Carolyn Price
Well I think that is actually quite a difficult question to answer because people have different reasons for asking it. So one thing you might be interested is whether consciousness can be explained in physical terms. So the question is in principle whether something that we know is just a physical thing could be conscious. If that's what you're after then my best guess is the answer is yes that consciousness does result from the capacities and activities that we have just as physical beings. So I think people create conscious machines in that sense every time they have a child. But another reason for asking the question is that you might be interested in knowing whether we could create a conscious being out of physical matter that's really quite different to the sort of carbon sludge that we have in our heads; whether you could have something conscious that was made of silicon and plastic and metal. So then the question is whether consciousness is something physical but whether it requires a particular kind of physical matter. And my answer to that is that I just don't know. It might turn out that there are technical problems in building something conscious that's not made of carbon sludge. I've no reason to think that there would be and I've no reason to think that there wouldn't be. But a third thing you might be interested in is whether consciousness could be something quite simple, something we might think of as quite mechanistic. So all we have to do is connect this wire to this wire and hey presto! We have something conscious. Now if that's the question then I think the answer is no. It might seem to us as conscious subjects that consciousness is really quite simple. It's a light switched on or off. But I suspect what underlies consciousness is really something quite complicated, something that's going to depend on lots of different capacities that we have as human beings and the way in which we interact. So if we can build a conscious machine I suspect it's going to be something very complex, something so complex that I think perhaps we wouldn't want to call it a machine any more

Winifred
Tim, a conscious machine - will we do it, could we do it?

Tim Crane
I don't think so. I agree with Carolyn that if you could replicate every physical feature of a person create a physical copy of the person, then you would have created something that was conscious. If a person is a machine then you would have created a conscious machine. I think I don't think persons are machines. I don't think there is any point calling people machines. I think we have free will. I think we have a kind of control over ourselves, which makes it unnecessary to call us machines. It's not a good way of describing us. So the real question about whether we can make a conscious machine is whether there is anything about the kinds of machines that we can now make which make us think that we could one day make something that's conscious. I don't think that there is. Computers for example aren't conscious and they never will be because what – all a computer does is simply process information and processing information is not sufficient for consciousness.

Winifred
Could I end by asking each of you to be bold and to make a prediction? Do you think there is any prospect of us explaining consciousness any time soon? Tim -

Tim Crane
In one way yes because I think people are finding out more and more about the brain so they're understanding more and more about the mechanisms of consciousness. I don't think

that's an explanation of consciousness of the kind that physicalists want because they want an explanation which will tell you what the essence of consciousness is in the brain and there may be no such thing. The analogy I like is that you could think of explaining consciousness as being rather like getting a person on to the moon. You know what it is to get that person on to the moon. You've got to send a rocket up there and when the person is on the moon you know you've got them there. It's sort of one job that you have to do. I think of it rather more like finding a cure for cancer where there is not one thing that cancer is and there's not one cure. There are many different strategies that people use to understand the phenomena and to try and help people who have cancer and so it's more of a piecemeal kind of thing. So I think explaining consciousness is much more like that. It's going to be a much more – much more a matter of breaking things down into their smaller parts

Winifred
Carolyn could you make your prediction

Carolyn Price
Well I agree with Tim that the first thing we need to do is to get a much better understanding of what it is that we are trying to explain and I don't think that's – there's going to be a very simple answer to that question. But I think one of the things that's making philosophy of mind a really interesting discipline at the moment is that philosophers of mind are turning their attention now to all sorts of aspects of the mind that have been neglected in previous decades. Topics like emotion like imagination and attention for example and I think that opens the way to an increasingly rounded understanding of what consciousness is and why it matters. I don't think we are going to get very far during the lifetime of this course but I think we might uncover some interesting ideas and make some progress and of course as Tim suggested it's not just up to philosophers. Psychologists and neurophysiologists are also very important