The Hard Problem of Consciousness

Anti-Physicalist Arguments and Dennett's Rebuttal

Introduction to Philosophy of Mind

Today's Plan

- Part I: The Hard Problem (Chalmers 1995)
- Part II: What It's Like to Be a Bat (Nagel 1974)
- Part III: The Knowledge Argument (Jackson 1982)
- Part IV: Dennett's Rebuttal – "Quining Qualia" (1988)

Key References

- David Chalmers, 1995, "Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness"
- Thomas Nagel, 1974, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"
- Frank Jackson, 1982, "Epiphenomenal Qualia"
- Daniel Dennett, 1988, "Quining Qualia"

Part I

The Hard Problem of Consciousness

"Consciousness" Is Ambiguous

Chalmers (1995): The term "consciousness" refers to many different phenomena. Each needs explaining, but some are easier to explain than others.

Some conscious phenomena give rise to "easy" problems; others give rise to the hard problem.

The Easy Problems

- Discriminating, categorizing, and reacting to stimuli
- Integrating information across cognitive systems
- Reportability of mental states
- Accessing one's own internal states
- Attention, deliberate control, wakefulness vs. sleep

Why Are These "Easy"?

"There is no real issue about whether these phenomena can be explained scientifically. All of them are straightforwardly vulnerable to explanation in terms of computational or neural mechanisms."

— Chalmers (1995)

We need only specify the mechanisms by which information is processed, retrieved, and made available.

The Hard Problem

The hard problem concerns subjective experience.

"When we think and perceive, there is a whir of information-processing, but there is also a subjective aspect. As Nagel (1974) has put it, there is something it is like to be a conscious organism."

— Chalmers (1995)

The Subjective Aspect

- Visual sensations: the felt quality of redness, depth in a visual field
- Other modalities: the sound of a clarinet, the smell of mothballs
- Bodily sensations: from pains to orgasms
- The felt quality of emotion and conscious thought
- What unites these: there is something it is like to be in them

The Central Puzzle

"Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? It seems objectively unreasonable that it should, and yet it does."

— Chalmers (1995)

Two sub-questions:
1. Why is there phenomenal subjectivity at all?
2. Why do specific experiences feel the way they do?

Part II

What Is It Like to Be a Bat?

Nagel's Central Claim (1974)

There is a subjective character of experience that cannot be captured by any objective, third-person account of the world.

No matter how much we learn about the physical and functional properties of a system, something is left out: what it is like to be that system.

The Bat Example

Bats perceive the world through echolocation. We can study the neurophysiology of bat sonar in complete detail—the acoustic properties, neural processing, behavioral outputs.

But this tells us nothing about what it is like to perceive through echolocation. The subjective character of bat experience remains inaccessible.

Objectivity vs. Subjectivity

- Science aims at objectivity: describing the world from a "view from nowhere"
- But experience is essentially perspectival: it exists only from a particular point of view
- The more objective our description, the further we move from the subjective
- A purely objective science cannot capture subjective experience

The Explanatory Gap

Even with a complete physical description of the brain:

- Why should these processes be accompanied by experience at all?

- Why should they be accompanied by these particular experiences?

This is not merely a gap in current knowledge—it appears to be a gap in principle.

Part III

The Knowledge Argument

The Knowledge Intuition (Jackson 1982)

"Tell me everything physical there is to tell about what is going on in a living brain... you won't have told me about the hurtfulness of pains, the itchiness of itches, pangs of jealousy, or about the characteristic experience of tasting a lemon, smelling a rose, hearing a loud noise or seeing the sky."

— Jackson (1982)

Mary and the Black-and-White Room

Mary is a brilliant scientist who has spent her entire life in a black-and-white room. She has studied the complete physics of color vision.

She knows everything physical about what happens when people see red.

One day, Mary is released and sees a red rose for the first time.

The Argument

- Premise 1: Mary knows all the physical facts about color vision
- Premise 2: Mary learns something new when she first sees red
- Premise 3: If physicalism is true, all facts are physical facts
- Conclusion: There are non-physical facts (about what experiences are like)
- Therefore: Physicalism is false

Two Gaps, One Target

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Epistemic gap	Modal gap
P → Q is not a priori	P → Q is not necessary
Mary cannot deduce Q from P	Zombies: P without Q is possible

Same conclusion: physicalism is refuted

Part IV

Dennett's Rebuttal: "Quining Qualia"

The Meta-Problem of Consciousness

The status of « problem intuitions »

- The hard problem: Why is there phenomenal consciousness at all? Why isn't all this information processing done "in the dark"?
- The meta-problem: Why do we think there's a hard problem in the first place? Why do we have intuitions that bat consciousness is mysterious, that zombies are conceivable, that Mary learns something new?
- Could we **dispel the intuitions**? If they could be showed to be unreal or unreliable, Good Old Materialism would have a very clear advantage again!

Dennett's Strategy (1988)

Dennett doesn't deny that we have experiences. He argues that "qualia" as philosophers conceive them—intrinsic, ineffable, private, directly apprehensible properties—do not exist.

The concept of qualia is incoherent: our intuitions about them are systematically inconsistent.

Traditional Properties of Qualia

- Ineffable: cannot be fully communicated in language
- Intrinsic: not relational or functional properties
- Private: directly accessible only to the subject
- Directly apprehensible: we cannot be wrong about our own qualia

Dennett's Method

Dennett presents thought experiments designed to show we cannot coherently hold all the traditional properties of qualia together.

Our intuitions pull in different directions, suggesting the concept is confused rather than picking out a real phenomenon.

Chase and Sanborn: Coffee Tasters

Two coffee tasters both report they no longer enjoy the coffee they once loved.

Chase: "The coffee tastes the same, but I no longer like that taste."

Sanborn: "I still like the same tastes, but the coffee doesn't taste the same anymore."

Can they really know with certainty which is true of themselves?

The Problem for Qualia

- If qualia are directly apprehensible, Chase and Sanborn should know with certainty what changed
- But memory is fallible—how do we compare present to past experience?
- They might be wrong about whether qualia or reactions to qualia changed
- This undermines the idea that qualia are directly and infallibly known

The Challenge to Intrinsicness

Dennett argues that what we call "qualia" are actually functional/relational properties in disguise.

The "taste of coffee" involves memory, expectations, comparisons, and judgments.

Strip away all relational and functional properties, and nothing remains to call a "quale."

Dennett on Mary

If Mary truly knew everything physical about color vision, she would already know what it's like to see red.

The intuition that she learns something new trades on the impossibility of actually imagining complete physical knowledge.

We smuggle in the assumption that something is "left over" because we can't imagine what complete knowledge would be like.

Summary: The Anti-Physicalist Case

- Nagel: Subjective experience cannot be captured by objective descriptions
- Chalmers: Even complete physical explanations leave out why there is experience at all
- Jackson: Physical knowledge is incomplete—there are phenomenal truths that escape it

Summary: Dennett's Response

- Qualia as traditionally conceived are a philosopher's fiction
- Our intuitions about qualia are inconsistent and confused
- What we call "qualia" are really functional/relational properties
- The "hard problem" rests on conceptual confusion, not a genuine gap

Discussion Questions

- Is Dennett right that the traditional properties of qualia are incoherent?
- Does the Mary thought experiment show there are non-physical facts, or something about the limits of imagination?
- Could a complete neuroscience ever explain why there is something it is like to be you?
- What would count as "solving" the hard problem?