Response to Chalmers’ ‘The Meta-Problem of Consciousness’

Abstract: I am glad that David Chalmers has now come round to the view that explaining the ‘problem intuitions’ about consciousness is the key to a satisfactory philosophical account of the topic. I find it surprising, however, given his previous writings, that Chalmers does not simply attribute these intuitions to the conceptual gap between physical and phenomenal facts. Still, it is good that he doesn’t, given that this was always a highly implausible account of the problem intuitions. Unfortunately, later in his paper Chalmers slides back into his misguided previous emphasis on the conceptual gap, in his objections to orthodox a posteriori physicalism. Because of this he fails to appreciate how this orthodox physicalism offers a natural solution to the challenges posed by consciousness.

I am grateful for the invitation to comment on David Chalmers’ interesting and wide-ranging paper. On the main issue, I am in full agreement with Chalmers. Explaining the ‘problem intuitions’ is the key to a satisfactory account of consciousness. However, I have a query about the way he approaches this issue, and a related objection to the way he effectively sidelines what seems to me, and to many others, the obvious way to understand consciousness.

Chalmers’ (2018) paper focuses on the ‘meta-problem’ of why humans find consciousness so puzzling. He points out that most humans intuitively feel that consciousness is problematic. They will say that physical processes do not suffice to explain consciousness, that consciousness is simple and non-physical, that it would be possible for our brain process to be accompanied by different feelings, or

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no feelings at all... and so on. We need to explain the source of these ‘problem intuitions’ in a way that is consistent with our positive account of consciousness.

Accordingly, Chalmers’ paper starts, in Section 1, by rehearsing a dozen or so possible explanations for the problem intuitions. As he observes, such explanations are not necessarily in competition — a number of different causes can work together to produce the same effect.¹ (Chalmers himself suggests that the most promising explanations of the problem intuitions appeal to the way our introspective models represent our perceptual powers as relating us directly to primitive properties.)

I was struck, however, by a notable absentee from Chalmers’ list of possible causes. I would have expected him to have favoured one simple explanation for the problem intuitions — namely, that phenomenally formulated claims cannot be deduced a priori from the physical facts. After all, he has been arguing for well over twenty years that this lack of a priori derivability is the source of both the hard problem and the explanatory gap.

A constant theme throughout Chalmers’ writings had been that ‘easy problems’ in cognitive and other sciences are easy specifically because they involve functional concepts that specify roles. We can happily account for learning, say, or memory, or genes, or life, because we start with an a priori conceptual grasp of the functional roles played by these items which allows us to identify which physical processes realize them. By contrast, Chalmers has always said, the ‘hard problem’ arises precisely because this kind of solution is not available. We don’t think of phenomenal states in terms of functional roles, and so cannot a priori deduce from the physical facts that phenomenal states are realized by given physiological processes. Relatedly, he has always argued, the apparent ‘explanatory gap’ is a consequence of our inability to derive the presence of phenomenal facts a priori from physical knowledge.²

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¹ Cf. Papineau (2011) where I stress this point after listing five possible explanations for problem intuitions about consciousness, and Papineau (2019) where I repeat the point while listing six. (In his paper Chalmers mentions the ‘antipathetic fallacy’ explanation that I first offered in Papineau, 1993; since then I have become open to a range of further explanations.)

² Here are a few of many passages. From ‘Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness’: ‘What makes the hard problem hard and almost unique is that it goes beyond problems about the performance of functions’ (Chalmers, 1995, p. 204). On the next page of the
Given this, it is very strange that the *a priori* underivability of phenomenal facts does not appear among the list of explanations for the problem intuitions discussed by Chalmers. If this ‘derivability gap’, as I shall call it henceforth, is responsible for the hard problem and associated explanatory gap, then why isn’t it the obvious explanation for why people find consciousness so puzzling?

Perhaps I am being too quick to equate the ‘problem intuitions’ with the hard problem and the explanatory gap. Chalmers introduces the problem intuitions by appeal to the verbal reports that ordinary people make about consciousness. By contrast, the hard problem and the explanatory gap are arguably issues that have been brought to life by debates within philosophy journals and other theoretical contexts. So maybe the derivability gap is the source of these theoretical conundrums, where other more mundane explanations are needed for the everyday problem intuitions.

But this doesn’t seem right. When Chalmers turns to the content of the problem intuitions, the first category he mentions is ‘gap intuitions holding that there is an explanatory gap between physical processes and consciousness’ (2018, p. 12). As to the hard problem, consider how Chalmers phrases it in just the third sentence of his paper: ‘why and how do physical processes in the brain *give rise* to conscious experience?’ (*ibid.*, p. 6, my italics). This formulation clearly presupposes that consciousness in non-physical. (If one thing ‘gives rise to’ another, they must be ontologically distinct. Fire gives rise to smoke, but H$_2$O doesn’t give rise to water, nor do the books on my shelves give rise to my library.) So the hard problem seems little different from Chalmers’ second category of problem intuitions, ‘dualist intuitions holding that consciousness is non-physical’ (*ibid.*, p. 12).

The problem intuitions, then, clearly incorporate the hard problem and the explanatory gap. So the puzzle remains. Why doesn’t the same paper: ‘There is an explanatory gap… between the functions and experience, and we need an explanatory bridge to cross it.’ From ‘Phenomenal Concepts and the Explanatory Gap’: ‘The gap is grounded in part in the apparent inability to deduce Q from P: if one cannot deduce that Q is the case from the information that P is the case, then it is hard to see how one could explain the truth of Q *wholly* in terms of the truth of P’ (2007, p. 169). And, curiously, even from the paper currently under discussion: ‘The hard problem turns crucially on the claim that the concept of phenomenal consciousness is not a functional concept: that is, it is not a concept of bringing about certain behaviours and other cognitive consequences. This is what generates the gap between explaining behavioural functions and explaining consciousness’ (2018, p. 50).
derivability gap appear among Chalmers’ proposed explanations of
the problem intuitions, given that he has always held it responsible for
the hard problem and explanatory gap?

I’m not sure what to make of this. One possibility, of course, is that
Chalmers has come to realize that the derivability gap is in fact a
highly unconvincing explanation for the intuitions involved in the
hard problem and the explanatory gap. This would make a kind of
sense. Much of the literature over the past three decades has focused
on the question of whether the derivability gap provides the basis for a
good argument against the materialist view of the mind. In that con-
text, no great harm was done when the derivability gap was run
together with the hard problem and the explanatory gap, as became
standard in much of the literature. Maybe these conflations displayed
some elements of confusion, but that was largely irrelevant to the
theoretical question of whether the derivability gap provided the basis
for a sound argument against materialism.

Things come out rather differently, however, when we come to view
the hard problem and explanatory gap as psychological phenomena in
their own right (which is how I shall view them throughout the rest of
this paper). Now the focus is not on philosophical arguments, but on
people’s intuitive reaction to the mind–brain relation. Why does
nearly everybody feel so perplexed about this relation? Why are they
so puzzled about the way the brain gives rise to consciousness? And to
these specifically psychological questions the derivability gap does
not seem the right kind of answer.

For a start, there is the point, familiar from the debates about the
argumentative significance of the derivability gap, that many other
kinds of facts, as well as phenomenal facts, seem to resist a priori
derivability from the physical facts. Yet these other derivability gaps
don’t seem to generate the same kind of perplexity as is prompted in
the mind–brain case. True, some anti-physicalist philosophers contend
that these other putative derivability gaps do not run as deep as the
mind–brain ones. But this then only prompts a further thought. If so
many smart philosophers cannot agree on whether a priori underiva-
bility is peculiar to the mind–brain case, then how likely is it that a

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3 Chalmers and Jackson (2001), Chalmers (2002). But see Levine (2010), which observes
that, when push comes to shove, Chalmers and Jackson don’t actually defend the view
that all non-phenomenal facts are a priori derivable from the physical facts, but only
from the physical and phenomenal facts.
specific sensitivity to mind–brain underderivability is responsible for the distinctive puzzlement about consciousness displayed by ordinary people?

Once we focus on the hard problem and explanatory gap as psychological phenomena, some other explanation than *a priori* underderivability seems to be needed. The obvious alternative is that these psychological reactions are brute intuitions expressing a priori commitment to dualism. That’s why people feel physiology leaves something unexplained and wonder why the brain ‘gives rise to consciousness’. They start off convinced that the mind is distinct from the brain, and so are unsurprisingly puzzled about the power of brain processes to generate the extra conscious phenomena. Abstruse worries about *a priori* underderivability don’t come into it. (It has always been my view that such a brute ‘intuition of distinctness’ lies behind the feeling that consciousness is puzzling — Papineau, 1993; 1998; 2003. Interestingly, Joseph Levine now agrees about this. While his original 1983 paper attributed the puzzlement to the derivability gap, by *Purple Haze* in 2004 he had switched to viewing it as a direct result of intuitive dualism.)

Of course, this appeal to the intuition of distinctness then generates a further question. Why are ordinary people so intuitively attracted to dualism? Now we are in the territory of explaining Chalmers’ ‘problem intuitions’. And here there is plenty of scope for further investigation. As Chalmers says, the literature contains a wide range of possible influences, and it is an exciting empirical research programme to figure out which are really doing the work. Still, one thing we should all agree at this stage is that the derivability gap will not feature among them.

So far I have offered no criticism of Chalmers’ paper. It might be surprising that he fails to mention the derivability gap as a possible source of the problem intuitions, given his previous writings, but in the light of the points made so far that is all to the good. Still, I am not sure that Chalmers has taken the moral sufficiently to heart. Later in the paper he seems to slip back into the bad old way of thinking.

Let me come round to this by raising another puzzle about Chalmers’ exposition. Most contemporary philosophers are materialists about consciousness. That is, they hold that conscious states are identical to or constitutionally realized by material states. Accordingly, they reject the problem intuitions as false. In their view, ordinary people are simply mistaken to think that consciousness is non-physical, intrinsic, explanatorily intractable, etc. No doubt there is
an explanation for people thinking these false things, but they are false for all that. On this standard view, then, consciousness exists all right, it’s just that people tend to have lots of false ideas about it.

However, Chalmers seems to begin his paper by defining this standard position out of existence. In his introductory section, he classifies anybody who rejects the problem intuitions as an ‘illusionist’. By adopting this terminology, he puts standard materialists in the same category as philosophers like Daniel Dennett and Keith Frankish who hold that consciousness itself is an illusion. That is, Dennett and Frankish don’t just deny the intuitions, they deny the existence of consciousness itself.

This lumping together of everybody who rejects the problem intuitions into the category of ‘illusionists’ thus seems to leave no room for the standard materialist view that the intuitions are illusory but consciousness isn’t. The way Chalmers cuts things up, either you accept the problem intuitions, and are a non-physicalist realist about consciousness, or you reject them, and are an ‘illusionist’ in the same camp as the consciousness-deniers.

This way of categorizing things is even more puzzling given the pessimistic end to Chalmers’ paper. He points out that neither non-physicalist realism nor illusionism offer a satisfactory account of the problem intuitions. Non-physicalist realism is unsatisfactory because it seems unable to give consciousness a role in explaining the problem intuitions, which thus renders the presumed truth of these intuitions worryingly coincidental. And illusionism is unsatisfactory because it is committed to the absurd claim that consciousness does not exist. Given this awkward dilemma, one might wonder why Chalmers is so keen to ignore a position that not only avoids it but is upheld by most contemporary philosophers of mind.

To be fair, there is one point where Chalmers does briefly mention the standard view. In Section 6 of his paper, he considers what he calls weak illusionism, which allows ‘that consciousness exists, but say[s] that it does not have certain crucial properties that it seems to have’. However, Chalmers quickly dismisses this position on the grounds that it doesn’t deal with the ‘hard problem’ and promptly reverts to his exclusive focus on the kind of illusionism (‘strong illusionism’) that denies consciousness altogether.

I found this very puzzling. The argument against weak illusionism isn’t spelt out, but Chalmers’ thought, I take it, is that illusionism of any kind needs to deal with the ‘hard problem’. Weak illusionists aim to do this by denying the problem intuitions. But, says Chalmers, this
doesn’t work, since ‘the hard problem does not turn on the claim that
consciousness is intrinsic, or non-physical...’. So, in order for
illusionists to eliminate the hard problem, they need to go the whole
hog, and deny the existence of the phenomenon that it concerns, as in
Dennett and Frankish’s strong illusionism.

The puzzle here is Chalmers’ objection to the weak illusionist line.
If we think of the ‘hard problem’ in terms of problematic intuitions, as
we have been doing, and in particular in terms of intuitions of non-
physicality (‘why and how do physical processes in the brain give rise
to conscious experience?’), then his complaint makes no sense. The
hard problem, so understood, turns precisely on the intuitive claims
that consciousness is intrinsic, non-physical, and so on. And the weak
illusionist has a perfectly good solution to it — namely, that these
claims are mistaken intuitions, and the only issue they raise is that of
explaining empirically why people find them so compelling.

Perhaps the best way to understand Chalmers at this point is to
suppose he is now thinking of the ‘hard problem’, not in terms of anti-
physicalist intuitions after all, but simply as equivalent to the deriv-
ability gap. But even on this reading it is hard to make sense of his
complaint. After all, weak illusionists — that is, standard materialists
— accept the existence of the derivability gap all right, but don’t see it
as a problem.4 Their response, as is familiar, is that phenomenal
claims may well be a priori unverifiable from the physical facts, but
this does not establish their ontological distinctness — a conceptual
independence of one set of facts from another does not always signify
an ontological independence.

For present purposes, we don’t need to adjudicate this long-standing
issue. The more immediate point is that this dispute is independent of
the current topic of how to explain the problem meta-intuitions about
consciousness. In particular, contrary to Chalmers’ suggestion, stand-
ard materialists do not aim to deal with the ‘hard problem’, if under-
stood as the derivability gap, by rejecting the problem intuitions.
Rather they simply say that this ‘hard problem’ is not a good philo-
sophical argument against materialism.

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4 Apart, that is, from the few remaining ‘Type-A’ materialists who still embrace analytic
functionalism and so deny any derivability gap. I agree with Chalmers that in failing to
recognize non-functional phenomenal concepts this position comes close to strong
illusionism.
Chalmers can’t have it both ways. Either we understand the ‘hard problem’ in terms of the problem intuitions, in which case standard materialism can deal with it straightforwardly by denying those intuitions, or we understand it as consisting of nothing more than the derivability gap itself, in which case standard materialism can respond without bringing intuitions into it, simply by saying that there is nothing in the derivability gap to threaten their position.

My overall diagnosis, then, is that Chalmers does not have a consistent stance on the connection between the derivability gap and the problem intuitions. When he discusses possible explanations of the problem intuitions, he seems implicitly to recognize that the derivability gap is one thing, and the intuitions another. But when he argues that weak illusionism has no answer to the ‘hard problem’, he runs the two together again, and so ends up confusedly condemning standard materialism for not addressing a problem it doesn’t have.

Maybe there are reasons to resist standard materialism, though I myself have never been persuaded. In my view, the much-discussed ‘knowledge’ and ‘conceivability’ arguments against materialism are both fundamentally flawed (Papineau, 2019). In any case, Chalmers’ new paper does not offer any new arguments against standard materialism. On the contrary, his focus on the meta-problem gives us all the more cause to embrace it. After all, his paper shows convincingly that neither non-physicalist realism nor strong illusionism afford a satisfactory response to the meta-problem. By contrast, standard materialism turns out to deal with the problem intuitions quite straightforwardly, once we understand properly what it is saying. Disregarding the mainstream view in favour of outlandish alternatives does not seem the best way to make progress with consciousness.

References


