

# NOT FOR PUBLIC RELEASE

David Papineau

## *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

Correspondence:  
Email: [david.papineau@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:david.papineau@kcl.ac.uk)

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

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

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

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

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.)

<sup>2</sup> 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

1 Given this, it is very strange that the *a priori* underivability of  
2 phenomenal facts does not appear among the list of explanations for  
3 the problem intuitions discussed by Chalmers. If this ‘derivability  
4 gap’, as I shall call it henceforth, is responsible for the hard problem  
5 and associated explanatory gap, then why isn’t it the obvious explana-  
6 tion for why people find consciousness so puzzling?

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

16 But this doesn’t seem right. When Chalmers turns to the content of  
17 the problem intuitions, the first category he mentions is ‘gap intuitions  
18 holding that there is an explanatory gap between physical processes  
19 and consciousness’ (2018, p. 12). As to the hard problem, consider  
20 how Chalmers phrases it in just the third sentence of his paper: ‘why  
21 and how do physical processes in the brain *give rise* to conscious  
22 experience?’ (*ibid.*, p. 6, my italics). This formulation clearly pre-  
23 supposes that consciousness is non-physical. (If one thing ‘gives rise  
24 to’ another, they must be ontologically distinct. Fire gives rise to  
25 smoke, but H<sub>2</sub>O doesn’t give rise to water, nor do the books on my  
26 shelves give rise to my library.) So the hard problem seems little  
27 different from Chalmers’ second category of problem intuitions,  
28 ‘dualist intuitions holding that consciousness is non-physical’ (*ibid.*, p.  
29 12).

30 The problem intuitions, then, clearly incorporate the hard problem  
31 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).

1 derivability gap appear among Chalmers' proposed explanations of  
2 the problem intuitions, given that he has always held it responsible for  
3 the hard problem and explanatory gap?

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

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

26 For a start, there is the point, familiar from the debates about the  
27 argumentative significance of the derivability gap, that many other  
28 kinds of facts, as well as phenomenal facts, seem to resist *a priori*  
29 derivability from the physical facts. Yet these other derivability gaps  
30 don't seem to generate the same kind of perplexity as is prompted in  
31 the mind-brain case. True, some anti-physicalist philosophers contend  
32 that these other putative derivability gaps do not run as deep as the  
33 mind-brain ones.<sup>3</sup> But this then only prompts a further thought. If so  
34 many smart philosophers cannot agree on whether *a priori* underiva-  
35 bility is peculiar to the mind-brain case, then how likely is it that a

---

<sup>3</sup> 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.

1 specific sensitivity to mind–brain underivability is responsible for the  
2 distinctive puzzlement about consciousness displayed by ordinary  
3 people?

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

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

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

35 Let me come round to this by raising another puzzle about  
36 Chalmers’ exposition. Most contemporary philosophers are material-  
37 ists about consciousness. That is, they hold that conscious states are  
38 identical to or constitutionally realized by material states. Accord-  
39 ingly, they reject the problem intuitions as false. In their view,  
40 ordinary people are simply mistaken to think that consciousness is  
41 non-physical, intrinsic, explanatorily intractable, etc. No doubt there is

1 an explanation for people thinking these false things, but they are false  
2 for all that. On this standard view, then, consciousness exists all right,  
3 it's just that people tend to have lots of false ideas about it.

4 However, Chalmers seems to begin his paper by defining this  
5 standard position out of existence. In his introductory section, he  
6 classifies anybody who rejects the problem intuitions as an 'illusion-  
7 ist'. By adopting this terminology, he puts standard materialists in the  
8 same category as philosophers like Daniel Dennett and Keith Frankish  
9 who hold that consciousness itself is an illusion. That is, Dennett and  
10 Frankish don't just deny the intuitions, they deny the existence of con-  
11 sciousness itself.

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

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

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

38 I found this very puzzling. The argument against weak illusionism  
39 isn't spelt out, but Chalmers' thought, I take it, is that illusionism of  
40 any kind needs to deal with the 'hard problem'. Weak illusionists aim  
41 to do this by denying the problem intuitions. But, says Chalmers, this

1 doesn't work, since 'the hard problem does not turn on the claim that  
2 consciousness is intrinsic, or non-physical...'. So, in order for  
3 illusionists to eliminate the hard problem, they need to go the whole  
4 hog, and deny the existence of the phenomenon that it concerns, as in  
5 Dennett and Frankish's strong illusionism.

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

16 Perhaps the best way to understand Chalmers at this point is to  
17 suppose he is now thinking of the 'hard problem', not in terms of anti-  
18 physicalist intuitions after all, but simply as equivalent to the deriva-  
19 bility gap. But even on this reading it is hard to make sense of his  
20 complaint. After all, weak illusionists — that is, standard materialists  
21 — accept the existence of the derivability gap all right, but don't see it  
22 as a problem.<sup>4</sup> Their response, as is familiar, is that phenomenal  
23 claims may well be *a priori* underivable from the physical facts, but  
24 this does not establish their ontological distinctness — a conceptual  
25 independence of one set of facts from another does not always signify  
26 an ontological independence.

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

---

<sup>4</sup> 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.

1 Chalmers can't have it both ways. Either we understand the 'hard  
 2 problem' in terms of the problem intuitions, in which case standard  
 3 materialism can deal with it straightforwardly by denying those  
 4 intuitions, or we understand it as consisting of nothing more than the  
 5 derivability gap itself, in which case standard materialism can respond  
 6 without bringing intuitions into it, simply by saying that there is  
 7 nothing in the derivability gap to threaten their position.

8 My overall diagnosis, then, is that Chalmers does not have a con-  
 9 sistent stance on the connection between the derivability gap and the  
 10 problem intuitions. When he discusses possible explanations of the  
 11 problem intuitions, he seems implicitly to recognize that the deriva-  
 12 bility gap is one thing, and the intuitions another. But when he argues  
 13 that weak illusionism has no answer to the 'hard problem', he runs the  
 14 two together again, and so ends up confusedly condemning standard  
 15 materialism for not addressing a problem it doesn't have.

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

29

## References

- 30 Chalmers, D.J. (1995) Facing up to the problem of consciousness, *Journal of Con-*  
 31 *sciousness Studies*, 2 (3), pp. 200–219.  
 32 Chalmers, D.J. (2002) Does conceivability entail possibility?, in Hawthorne, J. &  
 33 Gendler, T. (eds.) *Conceivability and Possibility*, Oxford: Oxford University  
 34 Press.  
 35 Chalmers, D.J. (2007) Phenomenal concepts and the explanatory gap, in Alter, T.  
 36 & Walter, S. (eds.) *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge*, Oxford:  
 37 Oxford University Press.  
 38 Chalmers, D.J. (2018) The meta-problem of consciousness, *Journal of Conscio-*  
 39 *ness Studies*, 25 (9–10), pp. 6–61.  
 40 Chalmers, D.J. & Jackson, F. (2001) Conceptual analysis and reductive explana-  
 41 tion, *Philosophical Review*, 110, pp. 315–361.

- 1 Levine, J. (1983) Materialism and qualia: The explanatory gap, *Pacific Philo-*  
2 *sophical Quarterly*, **64**, pp. 354–361.
- 3 Levine, J. (2004) *Purple Haze*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- 4 Levine, J. (2010) The *Q* factor: Modal rationalism vs. modal autonomism, *Philo-*  
5 *sophical Review*, **119**, pp. 365–380.
- 6 Papineau, D. (1993) Physicalism, consciousness and the antipathetic fallacy,  
7 *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, **71**, pp. 169–183.
- 8 Papineau, D. (1998) Mind the gap, in Tomberlin, J. (ed.) *Philosophical Per-*  
9 *spectives: Language, Mind, and Ontology*, **12**, pp. 373–388.
- 10 Papineau, D. (2003) *Thinking about Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University  
11 Press.
- 12 Papineau, D. (2011) What exactly is the explanatory gap?, *Philosophia*, **39**, pp. 5–  
13 19.
- 14 Papineau, D. (2019) The problem of consciousness, in Kriegel U. (ed.) *The Oxford*  
15 *Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University  
16 Press.