Physicalism and Experience

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Chalmers' Dualism

In "Facing Up to The Problem of Consciousness" (1995), David Chalmers argues that the existence of consciousness, by which he means experience (the term I will use hereafter), makes physicalism impossible and forces us to conclude that experience is a fundamental property of the world and some form of dualism is true. In his view, there is an explanatory gap between the physical and the experiential, and experience must be fundamental. He begins his argument by distinguishing the easy problem(s) of consciousness and the hard problem of consciousness. The easy problems consist of scientific problems, i.e., those that scientific methods can solve. This category includes questions such as what differentiates being awake from being asleep, our ability to access and report on our internal states, etc. These problems deal fundamentally with how we behave externally. Therefore, we can answer these questions by observing behaviour, developing predictive, testable theories which explain the observed behaviour and conducting experiments which test the predictions made by the available theories. In this case, the theories are talking about mechanisms which perform functions, and the phenomena being explained are the functions being performed, so there is no problem in explanation. Furthermore, it is easy to give physical answers to these functions, as one merely has to explain how physical bodies can perform them. Therefore, physically-based functional solutions to these problems are manageable. (Chalmers, 1995)

On the other hand, the hard problem is how physical states give rise to experiences. Given all we know about biology, psychology, and neuroscience, it seems evident that physical states cause experiential states. However, it's difficult to see how this could be the case, as they seem to be fundamentally different, which may imply they can't interact, let alone be the same. In Chalmers' view, we may be able to provide all the solutions to the easy questions of consciousness without solving the hard problem. The

solutions to the easy problems merely describe, explain and predict various observable behaviours conducted by human beings, their relations to each other and their relations to the biological states of the body. However, because none of the things these theoretical solutions describe are experiential or mention experience, it is logically possible that they could be entirely true of, and thoroughly carried out by, a system without experience. In other words, because it is logically possible that the physical can exist without the experiential, it cannot entail the experiential by itself. As a result, there is a further question of how and why experience arises. For that reason, Chalmers says that any theory that attempts to explain experience purely in terms of answers to the easy, behavioural/functional problems, i.e., in physical terms, will fail due to a logical, explanatory gap between functions and experiences. (Chalmers, 1995)

There are several ways Chalmers says theorists who make explanations in physical, practical terms deal with "consciousness," all of which he argues are unable to address the hard problem adequately. The first method he describes identifies "consciousness" as something non-experiential, defined in functional terms and gives a scientific, or science-based, explanation of it. After this explanation is complete, however, the theorist(s) will claim their account of consciousness has explained the experience. Chalmers accuses Dennett of this fallacy, among others. Another strategy, which Chalmers thinks is valid, is to say that how the experience relates to physical states is too difficult, at least for now, and to focus exclusively on the easy problems. A third approach, which Chalmers finds unreasonable, is to deny the phenomenon of experience in some way. One way this is done is to say that anything not externally observable is not genuinely real and doesn't need to be accounted for. Consequently, since we can directly observe experience internally and never externally, it should be discarded. Others will say experience exists, but only if the experience is equated with some functional qualities, such as accessing internal states. Chalmers argues these approaches are fundamentally flawed because experience is something to be explained and so can't be discarded. Another method, similar to the first, explains human behaviour and functions, i.e.,

answers to the "easy problems," and says that this thoroughly explains experience without dealing with *how* it explains the experience. In other words, it is taken for granted that solving the easy problems solves the hard problem. (Chalmers, 1995)

Due to the explanatory gap between physical, functional theories and experiential phenomena and the resulting failure of such theories to explain the experience, Chalmers argues we need an "extra ingredient" in our explanation of experience. This ingredient cannot be anything physical or a function carried out by a biological system because, as Chalmers argued, the experience cannot be entailed by the biological, so reductionist explanations fail. Therefore, since experience cannot be reduced to other qualities, it must be taken as fundamental, meaning it isn't explained in terms of anything more basic but is one of the world's basic properties. Chalmers thus concludes that any adequate explanation of experience must posit it as fundamental and lay out a set of fundamental laws which explain its causal relationships. These laws explain how experiences causally interact with other basic properties like extension and mass. Any such theory which is adequately worked out will tell us how experience arises out of the physical world and what relations of dependence exist between experience and matter. Since this theory postulates fundamental properties other than physical ones, he concludes that it constitutes a form of dualism. (Chalmers, 1995)

Dennett's Objections to Chalmers

In "Facing Backwards on the Problem of Consciousness" (1996), Daniel Dennett responds to Chalmers' objections to physicalism and reductionism by arguing that solving all of the "easy problems" of consciousness amounts to solving the "hard problem." Chalmers and Dennett agree that explaining things such as reproduction, development, growth, self-repair, etc., constitutes an explanation of life because life is nothing other than these phenomena. Consequently, if someone argued that a different theory of life was needed above and beyond a view of these processes, they would be making a conceptual error in thinking life was anything other than reproduction, self-repair, etc. Dennett argues that this is analogous to the relationship between physical

functions and experience. In his view, to hold that giving explanations of physical functions, bodily processes, and behaviour doesn't tell us how these things give rise to or explain the experience is to make the same sort of conceptual error because experience is nothing other than these physical functions, bodily processes and behaviours. To support this, Dennett asks us to imagine what our experience would be in the absence of these functional, causal properties. In his view, this would mean subtracting our delight and dismay at different things, concentration and distraction, inability to hold less than a few things in our minds at a time, etc. In other words, we would have to remove everything that made us act or feel. Dennett concludes that it is impossible to imagine such an experience, so without these functions, there is no experience. Therefore, experience is not over and above these functions and is reducible. And if it is, Chalmers must be positing something over and above our everyday experiences and human functions, which he has no reason to do. (Dennett, 1996)

Dennett's mistakes and the fundamentality of experience

There are several problems with Dennett's response to Chalmers, the first of which is that he misrepresents Chalmers' concept of the "easy problems." As explained above, Chalmers calls the "easy problems" of consciousness those questions of explaining only phenomena directly observable "from the outside," such as behaviours and biological states, and argues that explaining those things does not entail an explanation of experience. However, when Dennett is asking us to imagine our experience without functions and performance of functions - which he takes to be the solutions to the easy problems - he includes qualities such as delight, dismay and "unnameable sinking feelings of foreboding" (1996), which are themselves experiential and not directly observable "from the outside." Therefore, Dennett includes in the "easy problems" precisely those things Chalmers excludes from the category and is misrepresenting him. As explained above, in Chalmers' view, it is exactly because the easy problems do not require an explanation which involves an experience that their solution cannot entail a solution to the hard problem. (Chalmers, 1995; Dennett, 1996)

Dennett would respond to this criticism by saying that, as he has argued in his previous work, an explanation of biological functioning and behaviour must take into account experience because experience serves an analytical, functional role in the system. Similarly, he would also say that if your explanation of experience doesn't discuss its functions, you don't explain experience at all. Chalmers would respond by saying that, from a purely theoretical point of view, you can postulate mechanisms that perform those functions and do not involve experience. While it may be the case that the mechanism which performs those functions is experiential and that part of the experiential quality involves analysis, etc., it is at least hypothetically possible for those analytical, functional roles to be played by something non-experiential because insofar as they are analytical, functional, behaviour-producing. So, they do not logically entail experience. After all, computers can perform analytical, functional, behaviour-producing roles, and it is not apparent that they have experience. Even the human body does many things which perform similar functions without involving experience, such as making our hearts beat. Fundamentally, these analytical, functional, behaviour-producing roles are defined entirely in non-experiential terms and do not need experiential explanatory factors. This is important because the tricky question is ultimately about how things which can be wholly described in non-experiential terms relate to experiential qualities, given a lack of logical entailment. And if Dennett is genuinely committed to reductionist physicalism, he must support the position that experiential attributes can be explained wholly in non-experiential terms. Therefore if he includes experience in his explanation of functions and uses functions to experience, he fails to address the problem. (Dennett, 1996)

However, the most profound problem with Dennett's objection is that it ultimately has no relevance to the explanatory gap argument on the best possible interpretation. This interpretation argues that experience is conceptually basic and must be metaphysically fundamental. It begins with an analysis of metaphysical reducibility. If one thing, A, is metaphysically reducible to another thing, B, this means A is nothing more than an arrangement of B. In other words, if B is "put together" in the right way,

given certain known truths about B and its rules, it constitutes A and explains all of A's properties. Therefore, the metaphysical reducibility of A to B implies a full explanation of A in terms of B. To illustrate, take the example of the reduction of water to chemicals. In this case, we explain how the correct chemicals, hydrogen and oxygen, must be arranged so that they are bonded together correctly, with two hydrogen atoms bonded to one oxygen atom. We can use other truths we know about chemistry to fully explain water's properties. Consequently, we conclude there is nothing more to water than two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom bonded together.

To explain something, the explanatory factors must necessitate the explanandum (the thing being explained), which itself requires conceptual reducibility of the explanandum to the explanatory factors. This is because for an explanation to be complete, the explanatory factors must fully entail what is being explained, as any explanation which didn't account for all the properties of what is being described would by definition not be a full explanation. Consequently, the explanation and all the explanatory factors must contain everything about what is being explained. As such, we must be able to reduce the explanandum to the explanatory factors conceptually. Therefore, since metaphysical reducibility implies full explanation, which means conceptual reducibility, metaphysical reducibility suggests conceptual reducibility.

Experience cannot be defined in purely non-experiential terms. At its core, our concept of experience is defined by feeling, the "what it's like" -ness, as it were. When we talk about an organism or a mental state's experiential qualities, we are talking about how it feels to be that organism or to have that mental state. In other words, the defining quality of experience is the experience itself. Therefore, if we define experience purely through non-experiential factors, like the causal roles it has in our behaviour, or through the analytical roles it plays, we lose the qualities of feeling, and it ceases to be experienced. Therefore, reductionism must be false since reductionism takes experience to be metaphysically reducible to non-experiential factors and implies that experience is conceptually reducible to non-experiential elements. Instead, the experience must be

metaphysically fundamental, as Chalmers (1995) says. As such, whether or not an explanation of our functional properties needs to involve experience or whether or not Dennett (or anyone else) can imagine the experience without the causal relationships that surround them is irrelevant. The falsity of reductionism is a logical necessity following the conceptual independence of experience.

Dennett would object to this line of reasoning by denying that experience cannot be conceptually reduced to anything else, i.e., he would say it is possible to reduce experience to non-experiential concepts (Dennett, 1996). For Dennett to hold this position, he will have to say that experience is not the defining quality of experience, in the sense that there are more basic concepts which define experience. If this is true, there must be some other quality which defines experience, by virtue of which we would be able to fully explain and understand what it means to feel and experience something. Perhaps he will say analysis of a certain sophistication is this quality. Whatever quality he picks, he will need to show not only that absolutely everything we understand about experience, including the "what it's like" -ness, follows from it, but that this quality will be able to pick out experience with perfect accuracy, i.e., it will be able to pick out experience and only experience. Only then will we be able to say that this quality, at least under certain conditions, is identical to experience. The burden of proof is on him to provide this quality and show it can be used in this way.

A second possible objection to this argument would be that non-experiential explanatory factors can, logically entail experience. As neuroscience and psychology show us, vision is not merely a passive process in which we pick up information. Instead, the brain actively interprets information; our vision reflects this. (McCann et al., 2021) Therefore, it's clear that the analytic processes performed by our nervous system lead directly to our experiential states. We can therefore conclude, based merely on states of the brain (obtained perhaps by brain scans) and our knowledge of the nervous system and the laws which govern it,

that it has all the properties of experience. This attempted defence of reductionism does not succeed. On the one hand, if our knowledge of the nervous system and the laws which govern it includes claims which involve experience, such as "if the brain is in such and such a state, it is having such and such an experience," then experience is not being reduced to non-experiential factors and the explanation is not genuinely reductionist. While it is true that neuroscience and psychology can tell us that brain states lead to experiential states, they are not committed to the total absence of experiential factors in their explanation, as reductionism is. On the other hand, if the explanatory factors contain nothing about experience, only the interpretation it reflects, the description provides us only an account of this interpretation, not the experience.

Another possible objection would be that explanation doesn't necessarily involve entailment because many explanations only involve establishing the probability of something, not the logical necessity of entailment. For instance, when we explain why someone becomes addicted to a drug such as heroin, we can cite factors like poverty, social marginalization, peer pressure, exposure to the drug, etc. while also holding that not every single person who has some or all of these pressures becomes an addict. While I agree that explanation does not always require that the explanatory factors logically necessitate the outcome, there is still entailment in some sense. In the case of the heroin addict, when we explain their addiction, we are not only appealing to the factors such as poverty and peer pressure but also our knowledge that such things increase the probability of heroin addiction. Given that, while the person is not guaranteed to become a heroin addict, it is logically entailed that they will have a higher probability of heroin addiction. In other words, the outcome isn't entailed, but the probability itself is. Only this broader sense of entailment is required for the above argument.

Chalmers' mistakes and non-reductive physicalism

While Chalmers is correct to argue that experience is fundamental, he is mistaken that this forces us to abandon physicalism and embrace some form of dualism. Chalmers seems to take it as evidence that if the experience is not explicable wholly in terms of the

properties traditionally ascribed to matter, it must not be physical and that we must posit some non-physical property or entity to explain it. However, this is not the case. The capacity to have experiences under certain conditions may be one of the matter's fundamental properties. Other basic properties of matter, such as mass, extension, and motion, are not reducible to each other. As such, there may very well be more properties of matter, also not reducible to the others, which we weren't aware of or weren't aware were material, such as the capacity to have experiences. This view, which posits the capacity for experience as a fundamental property of matter, is preferable to dualist explanations because it poses fewer essential metaphysical entities and achieves more simplicity with the same explanatory power.

It may be objected that this merely amounts to property dualism. However, property dualism maintains that experience is non-physical, despite being a property held by matter. But why should we conclude this? If the other fundamental properties of matter are not reducible and are all still equally "physical," why would experience be any less physical? What non-arbitrary reason could there be to say some of the basic properties of matter are physical and others are not? If this metaphysics is correct, the only thing tying experience to non-physicality is our history of thinking of it as such. And our history of ignorance is no grounds for metaphysical conclusions. Furthermore, the electrical charge was not always part of our conception of the physical world, and we don't conclude based on the existence of electrical charge that matter has "physical" and "non-physical" properties. Why do the same for experience (or the capacity for experience)? I see no reason to believe there is anything to being a physical property beyond a property of matter.

Conclusion

Here I have argued for a non-reductionist physicalism. I began with a summary of Chalmers' arguments for the fundamentality of experience and against physicalism, along with an overview of a response by Dennett. I then responded to Dennett, arguing

in favour of the view of experience as fundamental. Lastly, I argued that even if we make the experience fundamental, we shouldn't thereby conclude that physicalism is false.

Works Cited

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