

3 June 2016

THE POSSIBILITY OF MATERIALISM

Full paper available at:

<http://www.holli.co.uk/Possibility-of-Materialism.pdf>

1. Introduction

Chalmers intervenes in the debate

- Chalmers' contribution to the ongoing debate about consciousness – at the Tucson Conference (1994) and in 'Facing Up' (1995) – was intended to demonstrate that the materialists *had* to be wrong.
- He argued that an explanation of consciousness in wholly physical terms was not just difficult to demonstrate, but *impossible* – and that we should therefore accept dualism, or perhaps even panpsychism.
- But this strikes many as a strange conclusion. Despite all the evidence that consciousness is closely related to what goes on inside the human skull, the one explanation that is ruled out as even a possibility is a materialist explanation!

Problems and issues for a critique

1. Just what *is* Chalmers' argument?
2. The numerous different ways in which Chalmers has presented the argument: e.g. 'Facing Up', 'The Conscious Mind', Two-Dimensional Argument, etc.
3. Does he beg the question against the materialist?
4. Distinguish between comments which Chalmers makes as a *result* of concluding that materialism must be false and dualism true, and comments that act as explicit or implicit *premises* for the argument to that conclusion.
5. Disentangle the qualitative aspect of an experience, *what it is like*, from the subjective aspect, that it is like something *for a specific organism*.

An 'archaeology' of Chalmers' argument

- What follows might therefore be thought of as an *archaeology* of Chalmers' case against materialism.
- We are carrying out an investigation which aims to uncover the underlying form of the various presentations of his argument, together with their presuppositions and linkages.

2. The Form of the Argument

The basis for the argument

- Chalmers' argument derives from his understanding of the nature of *explanation*; namely, that explanation depends upon links between concepts such that one set of facts entails another set of facts.
- A full, transparent explanation requires an *a priori* entailment from the explanans to the explanandum.
- In the case of consciousness, there is no 'conceptual hook' (Chalmers, 2010, p.123) which might link phenomenal concepts with physical or functional concepts, such that there could be an *a priori* entailment of the phenomenal facts by physical or functional facts.

The argument in 'Facing Up' (1995)

- The easy/hard problem distinction acts as a premise for Chalmers' argument: viz. experience is the one mental phenomenon which is not explainable as a function.
- The argument in 'Facing Up' can therefore be summarised as follows:
 1. Physical accounts can only explain functions or yet more physical structure and dynamics
 2. But experience is not explainable as a function (nor, presumably, can it be explained as physical structure or dynamics), HENCE ...
 3. There can be no physical explanation of experience.

The argument in 'The Conscious Mind'

- According to Chalmers (2010, p.xv), the argument in 'Facing Up' is more fundamental to his case against materialism than the thought experiments in 'CM' (1996).
- The reason is that the thought experiments turn on points about structure and function that are similar to those presented in 'Facing Up'.
- The substantive difference between 'Facing Up' and 'CM' is that in 'CM' the notion of explanation is formalised in terms of logical supervenience and a priori entailment.
- We can therefore envisage a 'Master Version' which would succinctly and clearly set out Chalmers' argument in terms of structure and function, and also express explanation by way of a priori entailment.

The 'master version' of the argument

- For this purpose, we can utilize the version which Chalmers set out in his Mind and Modality class (1999):
 1. Physical concepts are all structural-dispositional concepts;
 2. If B truths are to be entailed a priori by structural-dispositional truths, there must be some analysis of B concepts in structural-dispositional terms;
 3. There is no analysis of phenomenal concepts in structural-dispositional terms; SO ...
 4. Phenomenal truths are not entailed a priori by physical truths.
- (Where 'B' stands for some domain that is to be subject to reductive explanation.)

The key premise

- The key premise here is the third premise. Chalmers claims that the only analysis that ‘seems even remotely tenable’ is a functional analysis (1996, p.104), so we can simplify this premise to: *There is no analysis of phenomenal concepts in functional terms.*
- Chalmers does not actually give much of an argument for this premise, claiming that ‘to analyze consciousness in terms of some functional notion is either to change the subject or to define away the problem’ (1996, p.105).
- Justification: he takes every aspect of an experience to be an explanandum in its own right – i.e. a phenomenon that is in need of explanation, such as the ‘bluish’ aspect of my experience when I look at the sky.

The key premise (continued)

- ‘Bluish’ may well be *associated* with cognitive aspects of vision, such as discrimination or attention, and with the relational properties of a colour space.
- But we can ‘carve out’ (Carruthers, 2004) the bluish aspect of my experience to form a phenomenal concept that can *only* be characterised in terms of what it is like – e.g. as ‘bluish’.
- *This* concept would seem to have nothing of the physical or functional about it which could form the basis for a reductive explanation.
- The root problem is that it appears that the orthogonal nature of the two types of concept means that there no possibility of any link which could enable a priori entailments from the physical or functional facts to phenomenal facts.

The strength of Chalmers' argument

- The argument only relies upon: (i) the nature of phenomenal and functional concepts, (ii) the nature of explanation, and (iii) an assumption which could only be denied by denying the manifest, namely that there is some phenomenal aspect to any experience.
- It thereby avoids any contestable assumption concerning the nature or ontological status of experience or of phenomenal properties – e.g. an assumption that phenomenal properties are *intrinsic* properties.
- It also avoids accusations of begging the question – for example, that the distinction between the easy and hard problems takes for granted a dualistic conception of the world from the outset.

3. Why the 'Master Version' of the Argument Fails

The argument's flaw

- On Chalmers' own account of meaning, what is important for a concept's inferential role is its epistemic intension, a function which specifies how that concept applies in different situations.
- So what Chalmers should actually be proving is that a phenomenal concept's *intension*, i.e. the implicit criteria for applying that concept, cannot be described in functional terms.
- How we characterize the phenomenal concept itself is therefore irrelevant.

The argument's flaw (continued)

- Chalmers says that we should evaluate an intension by considering a variety of detailed scenarios (1996, pp.57-58).
- But he never does this for phenomenal concepts – he simply takes it that the criterion for the applicability of the concept is the instantiation of the relevant phenomenal property in someone's experience.
- But if the applicability criteria for a phenomenal concept *could* be described in functional terms, then an a priori entailment of the phenomenal facts by functional facts might be possible after all.
- Perhaps this might be done as follows ...

Applicability criteria for 'sky bluish'

- Someone looks at the sky and their experience has a sky bluish aspect. Maybe they would say that their concept of 'sky bluish' applies if:
 - They could *recognize* the colour that they are experiencing as that which they term 'sky blue'; and
 - They could *discriminate* that colour's relational properties with respect to other colours as being those which they expect 'sky blue' to have, e.g. that it is not as deeply saturated a blue as navy blue, and that it is quite light in the same way that yellow is.
- We can eliminate qualitative language by referring to 'the colour I term *sky blue*', etc., where the term 'colour' simply refers to an area of someone's visual field being filled, in some distinguishable manner or other.

Chalmers' error

- He takes no account of the distinction between (i) a description or characterization of a phenomenal property, and (ii) the epistemic intension of our concept of that property.
- Because the applicability criteria for phenomenal concepts are implicit, and the qualitative aspects of experience so familiar and ineffable, we fail to see that there are indeed conceptual links between phenomenal concepts and functionally characterized concepts.

Chalmers' error (continued)

- But what is it that mediates between these two apparently orthogonal types of concept?
- It is Chalmers' notion of scrutability: i.e. given enough facts, we always know what some expression refers to and whether sentences containing that expression are true.
- Scrutability is debatable. But it underlies Chalmers' claim that an epistemic gap must imply a metaphysical gap: if materialism and scrutability were both true, then phenomenal facts should be derivable a priori from *some* set of physical or functional facts.
- So if we reject scrutability, we can also reject Chalmers' claim that the epistemic gap necessarily implies the falsity of materialism.

4. The Subjective/Objective Distinction

But wait a minute!

- Objection: for a fully materialist explanation, we need *objective* senses of terms such as ‘recognize’ and ‘discriminate’, e.g. in terms of observable behaviour. But my account uses only first-person senses of those terms.
- Is this a likely interpretation of Chalmers? After all, he usually emphasises the qualitative ‘feel’ of an experience as the aspect which prevents any conceptual connection.
- However, he does sometimes suggest that he is reserving the term ‘functional’ for objective descriptions in terms of observable behaviour.
- But now the gap is between first-person and third-person concepts of functionally characterized terms such as ‘recognition’. Why should we think that there must be an unbridgeable epistemic gap between *those* concepts?

The third-person viewpoint

- The third-person viewpoint derives from the possibility of *inter-subject* agreement on facts, obtainable (in principle) from any person placed in the relevant situation.
- The third-person viewpoint is therefore not a perspective on an objective realm that is separate from some *other* realm which is accessible only from a privileged first-person perspective.
- The third-person viewpoint is instead a *generalization* of the first-person viewpoint.
- Scientific facts are given in terms of structure and dynamics because we can thereby obtain strong inter-subject agreement, based on agreed measurement criteria for observations concerning space (giving us objective *structure*) and time (giving us objective *dynamics*).

The real epistemic gap

- But such inter-subject agreement cannot be had in respect of phenomena that are only cognitively available to a single person.
- So now we *do* have a reason to exclude a priori entailments from physical or functional facts to phenomenal facts.
- Namely, that there cannot be objective, *third-person* applicability criteria for a concept of a phenomenal aspect of an experience – because each experience is only had by *one person*, and is only cognitively available to that person. Only *you* can tell whether a concept of ‘sky bluish’ applies to your experience.

Interiority of experience

- But the reason for this is the 'interiority' or 'privacy' of experience.
- And we do have plausible accounts of the evolutionary development of interiority in physical organisms (e.g. Humphrey, 1992; Thompson, 2007).

The explanation we can have

- We might therefore conceivably have:
 - (i) an explanation as to how a first-person viewpoint, modulo experience, can come to exist in higher organisms;
 - (ii) explanations of the qualitative aspects of experiences in terms of our first-person notions of our own mental activities such as recognition or discrimination; and
 - (iii) explanations in neurophysiological terms as to how functions such as recognition or discrimination are instantiated in the brains of higher organisms.

Not the gap Chalmers wants?

- An anti-materialist might maintain that we must nevertheless rule out materialism, in favour of dualism or panpsychism, because the applicability criteria for our concepts of recognition, discrimination, etc. in (ii) cannot be expressed using our concepts of recognition, discrimination, etc. in (iii), for reasons inherent in the notion of a first person point-of-view, the existence of which has been explained in (i).
- This is the sort of argument which could only convince those who are *already* convinced of the falsity of materialism.

5. The Arguments in 'The Conscious Mind'

The Conscious Mind (1996)

- The three thought experiments in 'CM' (zombies, inverted qualia, Mary) gain plausibility from a 'double-distancing' of qualitative descriptions, such as 'bluish', from objective descriptions in terms of observable behaviour.
- Firstly, we think of the former in terms of our intuitive characterisations, rather than in terms of the implicit criteria we have for applying our concepts of them.
- Secondly, there is an unbridgeable gap between our first-person descriptions of our own mental processes and our third-person descriptions of those same mental processes.
- Hence we fail to see any contradiction when we try to think of a being that is physically and behaviourally identical to a human being but which lacks the phenomenal qualities of conscious experience – i.e. a zombie.

The Conscious Mind – inverted qualia

- ‘Double-distancing’ also leads us to think of the qualitative aspects of experience as *intrinsic* properties – as being simply ‘bluish’ or ‘reddish’.
- It is these supposed intrinsic properties which we conceive of as being inverted with respect to our mental activities in the ‘inverted qualia’ thought experiment.
- However, in the absence of intrinsic phenomenal properties there is no conceptual room for me to experience a colour which I recognize as that which I term ‘sky blue’ and which has those relations to my other experiences of colour that sky blue has, and yet for me to be actually experiencing (let us say) a very dark red.

The Conscious Mind – Mary

- What about Mary, the super-scientist in her black-and-white room?
- When she sees a colour for the first time, she is supposed to learn some new propositional fact. For example, that when *other people* look at a red rose, they have an experience with the same property which Mary's experience had when she saw a red object for the first time (Jackson, 1986).
- But in the absence of intrinsic phenomenal properties there is no such propositional fact for her to learn.

Intrinsic phenomenal properties

- But doesn't Chalmers claim that phenomenal properties *are* intrinsic properties?
- Yes – but that is as a *result* of reaching the conclusion that materialism must be false and dualism must be true.
- So that claim does not form a premise for his argument against materialism (and if it did so, then a materialist could argue that it begs the question so far as they are concerned).
- Chalmers' definition of qualia and his definition of the hard problem are both based very simply on the claim that there are properties which characterise experiences by what it is like to have them. Indeed, he explicitly *excludes* any attribution of intrinsicity from his definition of qualia (2010, pp.104-105).

6. Chalmers and the Phenomenal Concept Strategy

The Phenomenal Concept Strategy (PCS)

- 'Type-B' materialism rejects the inference of a metaphysical gap from an epistemic gap. Chalmers has argued (2010, pp. 115-118) that such a position is untenable, because it relies on either the assertion of a brute and unsupported identity, or some unjustifiable and unnecessary form of modality.
- The PCS accepts the epistemic gap. Therefore, says Chalmers (2010, pp.321-322), it needs to somehow *justify* its rejection of a metaphysical gap, and it might attempt to do this by showing how the epistemic gaps which we find in respect of consciousness could arise in a purely physical world. That would constitute a counterexample to the claim that those epistemic gaps must imply a metaphysical gap.
- His argument against the PCS is designed to show that it cannot possibly do this.

Is the argument against the PCS relevant?

- Does Chalmers' argument against the PCS apply to my suggestion that the epistemic gaps are due to the development of interiority as a physically explicable attribute of complex organisms?
- That suggestion is *not* aimed at showing that the epistemic gaps relating to consciousness can arise in a purely physical world, and Chalmers' argument against the PCS is therefore not relevant to it.
- The suggestion is instead aimed squarely at Chalmers' general rejection of type-B materialism, and specifically at his dismissal of identity claims as brute and unsupported.

An identity assertion

- We *do* have a rationale for thinking that there is some form of identity underlying the properties which instantiate two different types of concept.
- Namely, that the mental processes of recognizing, discriminating, and so on, that we conceptualize in first-person terms are *the very same mental processes* of recognizing, discriminating, and so on, that we can conceptualize in third-person terms.

An identity assertion (continued)

- Chalmers can try and repeat his strategy of arguing that the epistemic intensions of the former concepts are different from the epistemic intensions of the latter, but this would now be beside the point ...
- ... because we accept that the epistemic gap exists, but have a clear rationale for maintaining that there is an identity nonetheless, and that the properties which instantiate these two types of concept represent two different ways of apprehending a single mental process.
- For Chalmers to insist, against this, that the relationship between *those* properties must be that of a fundamental law of nature would appear to be unmotivated – except to in order save his argument for dualism.

7. Interiority, Exteriority, Ontology

Interiority & applicability criteria

- Suppose that some sort of inter-subject knowledge concerning my interior mental activities were somehow possible.
- No third-person applicability criteria could ever overrule the first-person criteria that I have for applying my concepts of those interior processes.
- For example, my criteria for saying that I am recognizing the colour which I now experience as that which I term 'blue' is simply that I am aware that that is precisely what I am doing.

Interiority & applicability criteria (continued)

- Why would I instead use some roundabout route that relied on objective criteria, such as those relating to the observation of my own behaviour and the scientific measurement of the activity of the neurons in my brain?
- Or – supposing that it were somehow possible – the judgments of others who have access to my interior mental processes?
- This suggests that the fundamental reason for the epistemic gap between the physical and the phenomenal lies not in the qualitative aspects of the latter, nor in the lack of third-person cognitive access to the experiences of an individual organism, but in the very *existence* of interiority.

Interiority and exteriority

- The evolutionary emergence of interiority is intimately connected with the emergence of an exteriority with respect to that interiority.
- In other words, there can be no 'outside' without an 'inside' (Thompson, 2007).
- This implies that it is not just exteriority which is intimately linked with the emergence of interiority – *so is ontology itself*.
- Objects and properties as such – carved out, as it were, from the rest of the universe – cannot be thought of as existing without some form of interiority which distinguishes them (Maturana 1988).

Subject and object

- Our metaphysics should therefore not take for granted the category of 'object', and thereby presume at the outset a distinction between 'subject' and 'object'.
- This would be a clear case of an 'inscription error' (Smith, 1996), whereby we make – implicitly or explicitly – some initial ontological assumption, and then later read back that assumption or its consequences as constituting an empirical discovery or theoretical conclusion, without recognizing the dependence on the original assumption.

A mistaken metaphysics

- We would have presupposed the existence of a realm of exteriority, together with an interior realm which in some way refers to, or reflects, that exterior realm.
- We would therefore have taken for granted within our fundamental metaphysics the existence of reference and other forms of intentional participation in the world, and so be unable to explain them.
- This is what Chalmers does by demanding that an explanation for the phenomena of interiority be given wholly in terms of the phenomena of a *taken-for-granted exteriority*, rather than in terms of the development of interiority-exteriority as a *form of dialectical unity*.

8. Conclusion

Singular features of the gap – 1

- This ‘archaeology’ of Chalmers’ arguments has brought to the light of day a number of singular features of the epistemic gap as he conceives of it.
- Firstly, he fails to properly distinguish between our intuitive characterization of the qualitative aspect of an experience and the applicability criteria for our concept of that qualitative aspect.
- This makes it appear plausible that there can be no possibility of any ‘conceptual hook’ between phenomenal and functional concepts, and therefore no a priori entailment from functional to physical facts.
- But we found that, contrary to first impressions, the qualitative aspects of consciousness do not of themselves lead to an unbridgeable epistemic gap.

Singular features of the gap – 2

- Thinking about phenomenal properties in terms of their intuitive characterizations makes it easy to view them as *intrinsic* properties – which would beg the question against the materialist.
- Chalmers makes this error at key points when he puts forward his case against materialism:
 - (i) in his neglect of any systematic investigation of the applicability criteria for our concepts of phenomenal properties (he simply takes the criterion to be the instantiation of the intrinsic phenomenal property);
 - (ii) when he has recourse to inverted qualia;
 - (iii) in his use of Mary and the ‘knowledge argument’.

Singular features of the gap – 3

- Thirdly, there cannot be objective, third-person criteria for the use of concepts relating to phenomena which by their very nature are only cognitively available to one person.
- This consideration *does* result in an epistemic gap between the phenomenal and the physical or functional.
- However, the private nature of consciousness is scarcely mysterious, and can be given a plausible explanation in terms of the evolutionary development of interiority as a feature of complex organisms.

Singular features of the gap – 4

- Fourthly, Chalmers assumes that any materialist explanation of consciousness must be provided in terms of an already-existing assemblage of objects and properties, rather than in terms of the co-development of interiority and exteriority as a dialectical unity.
- This is to take it for granted that the external realm is, ontologically-speaking, prior to the interior realm.
- But this is an unwarranted assumption – especially when applied to mental activities that can be conceptualized from both interior and exterior perspectives.

What this 'archaeology' points to

- This 'archaeology' of Chalmers' arguments suggests that the epistemic gap has more to do with the nature of our own epistemological and ontologizing activities than it does with what Chalmers refers to as 'the basic furniture of the world' (2010, p.18).
- In which case, a fuller account of consciousness will require a better understanding of those enterprises, rather than an acceptance of some form of dualist or panpsychic ontology.

References

- Carruthers, P. (2004) Reductive explanation and the 'explanatory gap'
- Chalmers, D.J. (1995) Facing up to the problem of consciousness
- Chalmers, D.J. (1996) *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*
- Chalmers, D.J. (1999) Philosophy 596B: mind and modality (spring 1999), week 2 discussion, <http://consc.net/class/596b/week2.txt>
- Chalmers, D.J. (2010) *The Character of Consciousness*
- Humphrey, N. (1992) *A History of the Mind*
- Jackson, F. (1986) What Mary didn't know
- Maturana, H.R. (1988) Ontology of observing: The biological foundations of self consciousness and the physical domain of existence
- Smith, B.C. (1996) *On the Origin of Objects*
- Thompson, E. (2007) *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of the Mind*