

Qualia and What it is Like Arguments

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Abstract: Philosophy has always preoccupied itself with questions about the mind and consciousness. However, there are ways in which one could become confused. If there are purely mental facts, then they are so because they are not physical, and they are not completely explainable in a physicalist lexicon. The materialist on some accounts wanted to tell the dualist that mentalese is not translatable (and maybe should be wiped out, as eliminative materialism would have it). Or, on others, that there isn't any 'mental' activity left after reducing it? I hold that qualia and 'What it is Like' phenomena both show that there are concepts that can't be explained in a purely physicalist vocabulary.

Keywords: Nagel, qualia, philosophy of mind, physicalism, mentalese, dualism, what it is like, consciousness

I. INTRODUCTION

Qualia and 'What it is Like' phenomena can be explained neither in terms of physical facts, nor are they *physical facts* themselves. According to people like Frank Jackson, there is an inner subjective component when it comes to qualia and 'What it is Like' phenomena. Nagel's writing on this still topic sparks interest to this day, these phenomena pose looming problems that face materialist conceptions of mind. One of the clearest ideas to come out of the philosophy of mind is the notion of an explanatory gap. There is an irreducibility problem that suggests incommensurability between mentalistic and physicalist lexicons. Due to the nature of the subjectivity of individual experience, this problem runs deeper than issues of mere lexicography. The incommensurability is indicative of an ontological problem. I argue that there are phenomena in this area of discourse, even though they are not factual in a purely physical sense.

Let us be clearer here about these problems. There are two. We can phrase the general overarching issue in the form of a question: 'are there any mental facts which are neither (x) physical facts nor (y) explainable in terms of physical facts?' My response is that there *are* and that qualia as well as 'What it is Like' phenomena are neither explainable in terms of facts nor *are* they physical facts. They are the best candidates for 'the mental'.

$$(1) u \rightarrow \sim(y \vee x)$$

$$(2) y \& x \text{ _____ } (c)u$$

To phrase our question in plain English - if there are purely mental facts (u), then they are so because they either are not purely physical (y), or not explainable in a physicalist lexicon (x) or both (taking note of the inclusive disjunction). I hold that qualia and what it is like phenomena both show that there are private, perspectival experiences that cannot be reduced to

physical phenomena. I am arguing for the "category mistake" conclusion, using the above route.

II. PHYSICALISM AND REDUCTIONISM

The tension between dualist and materialist positions in the philosophy of mind comes into full view when dealing with this topic. Language incommensurability rightly suggests both the mind/body problem, and the quintessential 'What it is Like' scenario. If there is a question of what it is like to be x , then x has consciousness, on Nagel's account. If he believes that x , this invites the mind/body problem to arise due to the seemingly first person subjective (or species-specific in the literature) experience of x versus physical concerns. This is Frank Jackson's position, and he mentions this on the first page of 'Epiphenomenal Qualia'. (Jackson, 2002, p.273) It is monumentally important that the mind/body problem here is mentioned. The reason this is so is because there may be a question whether or not the incommensurability of two descriptive languages suggests an ontological divide.

'What is it Like to be a Bat' is crucial to understanding the contemporary discussions in the field and should not be overlooked. Consciousness always involves a *perspective*, he argues. According to this philosophy, there is always a point of view. A bat has a perspectival consciousness, a Martian has his or hers, and so on (Nagel, 2002, p.221). Purely materialist explanations, on the other hand, do not adequately provide their subjects with a particular point of view. They provide non-perspectival views from nowhere. These just don't arise in sentient beings on the planet as far as we know. According to Nagel's *From Nowhere* (Nagel, 1986), such a view is not possible. It looks as if physical explanations will always miss the experiential, perspectival, and private dimensions of mental phenomena.

Philosophers who disagree with this position should provide an argument that the bat does not have a particular kind of experience, and they are hard-pressed. A strictly materialist view most likely would hold that both parts (y) and (x) obtain (there is both an ontological and a linguistic problem), and that therefore our argument can be knocked down from a purely physicalist standpoint. It would have to be inconceivable that the facts of consciousness could be independent of physical facts cited according to materialist views. A favorite example is that of pain, a state of consciousness, being identical to c-ring firing (physiological state). A purely materialist standpoint would hold that pain and/or 'pain' can be reducible to the phenomenon of C-fibers firing.

Physiologically, the differences would be negligible if one pointed to the outward effects. To an observing party they

would appear to be the same. We the subjects withdraw our hands from the stove, say ‘ouch’, etcetera--the two phenomena are identical to outward appearances. Would a change in lexicography be possible? Eliminative materialists think so. (Churchland, 1981) Psychological terms such as ‘schizophrenia’ could be reduced to neuroscientific description, the lexicography describable here in terms of electrochemical activity in certain sectors of the brain. The *explanatory gap* between the physical and consciousness that could be thus reduced this way according to a materialist view. Has this project been conclusive?

III. QUALIA

Since reduction looms according to materialist accounts, we should now take a closer look at the purely ontological problem. Phenomenal concepts deal with the experiential. Material concepts deal with the physical. Frank Jackson argues that qualia in fact are not reducible to the physical. (Jackson, 2002) Our *u*, our mental phenomena above can stand alongside ‘the Physical’, unless one were to be an idealist, which I don’t advocate due to Berkeleyan problems and the looming solipsism that may ensue. We apparently have a dualist position. The arguments in the literature indicate that there are mental phenomena that cannot be reduced to the physical. The deeper problem is not that there are incommensurable languages describing these phenomena, but they are inherently different.

One of our contentions was that the linguistic problems lead into ontological ones. Dennett in ‘Quining Qualia’ writes: ‘Einstein once said that science cannot give us the taste of soup. (Dennett, p.230) What is going on here? I believe this very sentence ties into the ‘What it is Like’ arguments we will explore later. Frank Jackson in ‘Epiphenomenal Qualia’ comments on this thread: ‘I am what is sometimes known as a “qualia freak.” I think that there are sensations especially, but also of certain perceptual experiences, which no amount of purely physical information includes.’ (Jackson, 2002) We should also take note that the experience e.g., of tasting coffee, is different from the mere utterance ‘this tastes bitter’, for example.

Qualia are *private*, according to this view. A philosopher on this side of the fence will argue that there are mental phenomena that cannot be reduced to physical correspondents due to phenomenological concerns. The surface problems that arise such as mentalese, the explanatory gap, the incommensurability of dualism, which has been around since Descartes, all point to a deeper ontological problem. The best-known scenario is probably attributable to Saul Kripke, pointing out differences between pain and c-ring firing (Chalmers, 2002).

The answer to the questions about lexicography and ontological problems appears to be the irreducibility of phenomenal properties of experience—a subjective, phenomenologically dualist perspective. These cannot be entirely washed away, and physicalists need to provide an

account here in order to keep a bona fide materialist conception.

IV. WHAT IT IS LIKE

‘What it is Like’ arguments are related to qualia arguments. There are things that cannot be reduced to a purely physical substratum nor are they explainable in the physicalist vocabulary (or materialist if one is a Churchland follower). (Churchland, 1981) Qualia seem to prove our point. Einstein believed that science cannot give us the taste of soup. (Dennett, 2002) Some may argue your mother could, or culture, past experience, etcetera . . . but are these physical *facts per se*? Following Wittgenstein, these are *states of affairs*, really. I would say they are *not* facts. Coffee in respect to the above is an excellent example, and a favorite in literature. A culture, say, beatnik culture, would be socio-historically constrained. They notoriously loved coffee. Would African bushmen who spit it out share the same qualia? Probably not. They might have a blanket term such as ‘bitter’ although other facets - mostly environmental, I would think - surrounding coffee consumption, would be missing.

In addition to the similarity these arguments have involving qualia, there are a few facets of this particular concern that may be applied broadly. I believe this is philosophically interesting. ‘What it is like’ arguments might be extrapolated from the species-specific into individual cases. Logically, the idea can apply on a person to person basis -- similar to the cultural environment example I provided above. This might be more poignant than Nagel’s species-specific example.

There is a first person subjective experiential standpoint that cannot be explained away. Nagel, and Jackson direct our attention to this facet of human phenomenal experience. As long as there is something to be like *x*, there is consciousness. We do not share the characteristics of a bat. The bat does not experience the world in the same way. What are the phenomenological ramifications of states of affairs like these that obtain? It appears as if there is an irreducibility of the subject’s experiential viewpoint. The onus is on the materialist to provide a compelling account or continue onto a reduction.

Nagel concludes no physicalist theory can explain consciousness. As long as there is an *other*, something we can fathom that neither acts like us nor experiences like us (he mentions Martians as well) we are tapping into the idea that there is a nonphysical substance, a non-universal experiential phenomenon (Nagel, 2002, p.221). Reducibility to the purely physical realm does not seem to be a plausible option. Nagel writes: ‘An organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something to be that organism-something it is like for the organism. Facts about what it is like to be like an organism [. . .] signifies consciousness and the mind/body problem.’ (Nagel, 2002, p.219) As commonly stated in the literature, experience is rich. A purely physicalistic lexicon cannot capture this phenomenological facet of it. ‘C-ring’ firing does not capture pain on these views. Are these concerns mainly limited to an incommensurability of

descriptive languages? We stated both that these concerns, the referents of mental speak, and ultimately qualia and 'What it is Like' phenomena both lead us back to a subjective, phenomenalist dualism.

V. CONCLUSION

According to the argument we started with, u denoted 'the mental' and it is not the case that $\sim u$. The arguments we highlighted place the onus on the materialist to defend his or her position. Qualia and 'What it is Like' phenomena cannot be washed away, there are too many factors involved. Materialists, those who will hold either physicalist position, or both, will say that (y) mental stuff is reducible to physical stuff, or, inclusively, (x) mentalese cannot be reduced to the language of neuroscience. The beatnik loved his coffee, he had his favorite coffee shop back in the 1950's. His friends were there. The bushmen, who have not been exposed to it, do not share the same set of background experiences. There needs to be an account of these seemingly ephemeral items that contribute to consciousness.

Why *are* these tricky concerns for the materialist? Phenomena such as qualia cannot be reduced to purely physical explanation. My guess is culture, historical context, environment, as well as individual makeup all have a bearing on these differences. There is no substratum of purely material facts, *per se*, for a physicalist to grab onto for a reduction to take place.

'What it is Like' arguments point to particularities of experience. The bat scenario draws our attention to the fact that echolocation cannot just be passed over to some other

being with completely different sense modalities, and this particular facet of experiential existence is crucial. To critics of these contemporary problems posed to the materialist, a knock-down argument seems to be lacking. If we simply leave the table now, we are left with a dualist perspective.

In terms of logic, if there are purely mental facts (u), then they are so because they are not physical (y), and the second chunk is that they are not completely explainable in a physicalist lexicon (x). The materialist on some accounts wanted to tell the dualist that u , mentalese, is not translatable (and maybe should be wiped out, as eliminative materialism would have it) or, on others, that there isn't some tinge of 'mental' activity left. (Churchland, 1981) I shown that qualia and 'What it is Like' phenomena are concepts that can't be explained in a purely physicalist vocabulary. If we say that purely phenomenal items exist, they can't be physical.

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