

Overzealous Conclusions: Consciousness, Chalmers, and Zombies

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Introduction

How do physical processes give rise to subjective experiences?

The 'hard problem' is a phrase coined by David Chalmers- but the issue long predates him (Weisberg, 2025). We can observe that neuronal functioning leads to qualia, but it is unclear how: as Chalmers says, 'why doesn't all this information processing go on "in the dark", free of any inner feel?' (Chalmers, 1995). There is evidently an 'explanatory gap' (Levine, 1983) between our understanding of the physical world and our understanding of consciousness. It is not clear whether this gap is ontological, epistemic, or both.

Modern science's ontology is currently physicalist. Physicalism is often conflated with other concepts like eliminative materialism. However technically, in both science and the philosophy of mind, physicalism is merely the ontological paradigm that only the 'physical' exists: i.e. matter, energy, forces, spacetime, exotic matter, etc (Zalta & Nodelman, 2009).

This essay will examine various positions on the nature of the explanatory gap. It will do so with reference to Chalmers' views, but will make independent conclusions on them. The positions considered are listed below.

Dualism is the belief that the explanatory gap is ontological, and that there is either a 'mental' substance in existence- substance dualism, famously proposed by Descartes (Blum, 2019)- or that whilst there is only physical substance, this gives rise to both physical and mental properties- property dualism (Vintiadis, 2019): the position of Chalmers. Either viewpoint necessitates the expansion of a physicalist ontology.

Physicalism itself represents a vast spectrum of beliefs, all of which deny the existence of an ontological gap (Stoljar, 2010). At one end of this spectrum are the 'type A physicalists', which this paper will refer to as 'A-physicalists'. A-physicalists assert that there is neither an ontological nor an epistemic gap: mind and body are not separate, and qualia are merely physical states- hence there is no 'hard problem' (Speaks, 2018). Eliminative materialism is perhaps the most extreme physicalist viewpoint as it denies the existence of qualia entirely (William, 2024).

'Type B physicalists' (referred to subsequently in this paper as 'B-physicalists') are a group of different viewpoints at the other end of the physicalist spectrum. They assert

that there is no ontological gap but that there is an epistemic one (Speaks, 2018). Consciousness may be grounded in physical processes and is ultimately reducible to them, but as neurobiology can never tell us what qualia are actually like (see Nagel's bat analogy), we will never truly understand *how*. Dualist arguments may *seem* convincing, but they only reveal inherent human cognitive limits- and the consequent allure of expanding our ontology. The belief in the possibility of philosophical zombies is a dualist belief: B-physicalists argue that these are impossible (Chalmers, 2002).

'Type C physicalists' (referred to subsequently as 'C-physicalists') are a middle ground group. They assert that whilst there is currently an epistemic gap, this is closeable, and in fact will be closed by future scientific advances (Speaks, 2018). There is in fact no 'hard problem' because the real problem is merely current technology. C-physicalism is compatible with other viewpoints and can 'collapse' into them metaphysically.

Panpsychism accepts the dualist position that the mental is separate from the physical. However, it draws from this the conclusion that small packets of consciousness are therefore inside everything, regardless of the presence of neurons (Skrbina, 2017). Even particles may not display human-like levels of sentience but are still potentially capable of experiencing qualia (Skrbina, 2017).

This paper will consist of three further sections. The first (1. Favouring Chalmers) will explore both the strengths of Chalmers' viewpoint, and the premises he establishes which are, it will be argued, valid. The second (2. Against Chalmers) will argue that from these sound premises, Chalmers then draws overzealous conclusions and adopts viewpoints that are, it will be argued, not substantiated and are invalid.

Throughout these two sections, the previously listed viewpoints on consciousness will be explored. This paper will aim to demonstrate that not only Chalmers' dualistic and panpsychist conclusions, but also those of A-physicalists and C-physicalists, are in fact overzealous logical 'jumps' from the empirical state of what we know. In the second section, this essay will aim to demonstrate that B-physicalism is the only logical viewpoint to adopt out of the aforementioned candidates.

The final section will be a conclusion which summarises the paper's key elements and elucidates its conclusions on dualism, the physicalist schools, and panpsychism.

1. Favouring Chalmers

This section will first explore the strengths of Chalmers' worldview. It will describe first how he correctly identifies that there is a 'hard problem', and subsequently how he correctly identifies that this is a permanent epistemic gap that cannot be closed with technological advances.

'A mere account of the functions stays on one side of the [explanatory] gap' (Chalmers, 1995). Chalmers immediately grasps that the 'hard problem' cannot be described mechanistically. Trying to subdivide the hard problem into multiple 'easy problems' can never transcend this limitation. The functionalist approach explains only neurology- not qualia (Churchland, 1986), a point illustrated neatly by Nagel's and Jackson's famous thought experiments. So Chalmers' viewpoint stems from a sound premise: there *is*, in fact, a hard problem. A-physicalism simply asserts that this problem is a mirage. The most overzealous A-physicalists, eliminative materialists such as Dennett, remove qualia from their ontology altogether (Dennett, 1991). Whilst Dennett's denial of the possibility of philosophical zombies is logically sound, to compare the brain simply to a computer is to miss the blatant fact that computers don't *feel*. And if, as A-physicalists argue, the explanatory gap is not real, why is such a gap almost universally felt? It is unlikely that the A-physicalists wield a uniquely enlightened cognition. Given that the explanatory gap is a psychological dissonance pertaining to human epistemology/ontology (Levine, 1983), its clear existence in human minds is empirical proof of its existence in some form. Chalmers is correct in asserting both that consciousness has not yet been naturalised and that, consequently, there is in fact a gap.

Chalmers then correctly asserts that this gap is epistemically un-closeable. Neurobiology can explain only the mechanisms of human functioning: regardless of its advancement, even if it reveals to us every miniscule neural correlate of consciousness, it cannot explain why consciousness itself actually arises from electricity firing through cells. Moreover, if the hard problem could be tamed with technological advances, we would surely have made some progress with it since Descartes' day. To use a philosophical term, facts about consciousness can be characterised as 'further facts': they do not logically follow from mere physical

descriptions of the world (Parfit, 1986). The position of the C-physicalists thus seems to be refuted: the epistemic gap does not stem from technological limitations, but rather our inherent, human cognitive limitations. McGinn's new mysterianism describes this aptly: consciousness is subject to DIME thinking and is thus a mystery, not a problem (McGinn, 1994). This is empirically obvious: humanity's greatest thinkers have failed to naturalise consciousness and consciousness is not only a scientific field: it is a philosophical matter as well. Hence Chalmers is also correct in asserting that the explanatory gap of consciousness is epistemically un-closeable.

2. Against Chalmers

Yet although Chalmers begins from sound premises, he subsequently forms overzealous conclusions. The first is his endorsement of (property) dualism, and the second is his endorsement of panpsychism. These are overzealous because they do not logically follow from the aforementioned two premises, and are not substantiated by evidence.

Chalmers correctly perceives the reality of the explanatory gap: but he asserts that this is not merely epistemic but *ontological*. Though property dualism *seems* milder than substance dualism, it is just as extreme in asserting an expansion of our ontology to a 'ghost in the machine'. But this is to misunderstand the nature of the mystery. Consciousness may yet be beyond our total comprehension, but it is not beyond scientific study: we can still learn (albeit limited) meaningful facts about how consciousness works. For example, we know it is fundamentally linked to neuronal activity and to brain states (Kitchener & Hales, 2022). We thus have empirical evidence that the physical is *involved* in consciousness, even if the nature of that involvement inevitably puzzles us. We have no evidence, however, of a ghost in the machine- nor have we ever. Just because the relationship between the physical and consciousness is unclear, that does not mean we must expand our ontology. Chalmers is committed to the possibility of philosophical zombies: but why? No dualist has ever explained *why* a 'zombie' with a human nervous system could not in fact be conscious. Nor could they ever: because the nature of their 'ghost' will always be beyond scientific study or evidence. Dualists' cognitive architecture prevents them from perceiving how the physical links to consciousness, but unlike B-physicalists they then assert that

there is something else entirely. But we cannot understand this proposed 'mental' substance/property either. It will remain eternally beyond study and opens an unending philosophical can of worms as to what it is, where it comes from, how it works, and how it interacts with the physical. Hence Chalmers' dualism is an overzealous conclusion from sound premises. He correctly falsifies A-physicalism and C-physicalism, but cannot refute B-physicalism and therefore resorts to ghosts.

Chalmers' other overzealous conclusion is that of panpsychism. The allure of panpsychism throughout history is likely due to its romantic, satisfying nature: but it has no scientific basis. Consciousness is a mystery: our guiding empirical beacon in this mystery is that it arises from neurons (Kitchener & Hales, 2022). Yet panpsychism is the blissful ignorance of this one concrete fact. No panpsychist can ever explain *how* a rock or a tear-drop can have qualia: they face the dualist problem of never being able to. Chalmers is even a 'panprotopsychoist', who asserts that technological systems like thermostats may also have qualia (Chalmers, 2013). This is possible only if qualia are unrelated to physical properties- but this conclusion is, as has just been established, itself overzealous.

Consciousness may be a mystery, but the attitude to adopt shouldn't be one of hopeless resignation and romantic speculation. We should attempt to learn what we can with the scientific method and accept what this cannot unveil for us. Hence the sensibility of B-physicalism: it acknowledges the permanence of the epistemic gap but still attempts to apply scientific principles. It conceptualises consciousness according to the worldview that humanity has evidence for. If there is evidence for a ghost in the machine, then naturally science should accordingly expand its ontology. Until then, we should stick to what we know and what the evidence reveals: there is no need for overzealous conclusions.

Conclusion

To summarise, Chalmers' viewpoint has strengths and weaknesses. It correctly identifies two essential starting premises: there is a 'hard problem', and there is an uncloseable epistemic gap. These premises are empirically substantiated. However, from these premises Chalmers draws the overzealous conclusions of (property) dualism and panpsychism. These conclusions are not empirically substantiated, and

by their nature never can be. They are theoretical ‘jumps’ that do not logically follow from the existing evidence on consciousness and ontology.

However, A-physicalism and C-physicalism are *also* overzealous conclusions. There *is* an epistemic gap, and this is not closeable: these facts are empirically validated. This validation is that a) consciousness does in fact perplex even highly intelligent humans, and b) neurobiology as a field is inherently limited, regardless of technological sophistication. A-physicalism and C-physicalism are thus also invalid.

Hence, this paper argues that only B-physicalism logically follows from the basic premises of the ‘hard problem’ that Chalmers correctly identifies. B-physicalism also lends itself to the most fruitful approach that thinkers can take: one where we accept our inherent cognitive limitations, but nonetheless seek to scientifically investigate everything we can and to adopt an evidence-based viewpoint without unnecessary ontological expansion. By solving all the ‘easy problems’ we will not automatically solve the ‘hard problem’, but we will still make valuable contributions to both our understanding of consciousness and to science in general.

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