

The Phenomenal Powers View and the Meta-Problem of Consciousness

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Abstract: The meta-problem of consciousness is the problem of explaining why we have the intuition that there is a hard problem of consciousness. David Chalmers briefly notes that my phenomenal powers view may be able to answer to this challenge in a way that avoids problems (having to do with avoiding coincidence) facing other realist views. In this response, I will briefly outline the phenomenal powers view and my main arguments for it and—drawing in part on a similar view developed by Harold Langsam—discuss how more precisely its answer to the challenge would go.

1 Introduction

The meta-problem of consciousness, as David Chalmers defines it, is the problem of explaining why we have the intuition that there is a hard problem of consciousness. In the first instance, the intuition should be explained in topic-neutral terms that describe the functions or structures that generate the intuition, or *meta-processes* for short, while leaving open whether consciousness itself (or any controversial alleged aspects of it) realizes or plays a causal role in these processes.

A solution to the meta-problem can then be turned into a challenge for particular realist (i.e. non-illusionist) theories of consciousness: Can what explains consciousness according to the theory also explain why we think there is a problem of consciousness, or in other words, explain how the meta-processes are realized? Chalmers argues that most realist answers to this challenge face the problem that they seem to render it a coincidence that the problem intuitions are caused, or the meta-processes are realized, by consciousness and not something else—such as mechanisms posited by debunking explanations posited by illusionists—and hence also a coincidence that the problem intuitions are true at all.

Chalmers then mentions my phenomenal powers view as one theory that might be able to answer the challenge while avoiding this problem. In what follows, I will give a brief overview of this view and my main arguments for it, and discuss how more precisely its answer to the challenge would go.

2 The Phenomenal Powers View

The phenomenal powers view is the view that phenomenal properties (i.e. properties which characterize *what it is like* to be in conscious states) have non-Humean causal powers—which is to say that they metaphysically necessitate their effects—in virtue of *how they feel*, i.e. in virtue of their phenomenal character, as opposed to in virtue of

entering into contingent regularities, as per Humean or Lewisian regularity theory, or being constrained by external governing laws, as per Armstrongian realism about laws. For example, pain has the power to make subjects who experience it try¹ to avoid it (in the absence of interference from other motives, such as a belief that enduring the pain would avoid a greater pain or promote a greater pleasure in the future) in virtue of feeling *bad*, i.e. in virtue of its distinctively disagreeable, repulsive phenomenal character. Also, this necessitation is *intelligible* not brute: when we know how pain feels, we understand *why* pain has this effect and not some other one.

My main argument for this view is a conceivability argument (Mørch 2019, 2018). According to this argument, it is not conceivable that pain makes a subject try to pursue it, remain indifferent to it or do anything else than avoid it (again, in the absence of interfering motives), when *making* is understood as exertion of (non-Humean) causal powers. That is, it might be conceivable that pain has different (or no) effects assuming it has *no* causal powers, i.e. that the regularity theory, the governing laws view, or epiphenomenalism is true about pain. But assuming pain has *some* causal power, it is not conceivable that it has different effects than its actual one.

One might think this connection is trivial or analytic. First of all, one might think that it presupposes a functional concept of pain, which picks it out in terms of its actual causal role and thereby analytically connects it to it. But according to the argument, the connection also (and primarily) obtains when we conceive of pain under a *phenomenal* concept, which picks it out simply in terms of how it feels, and is not analytically connected to any causal role. One might also think the assumption that (phenomenal) pain has *some* causal power analytically entails that it has its particular, actual avoidance power. But compare a physical object such as a billiard ball. Assuming billiard balls have some causal power, it is still conceivable that it has some other power than its actual one, such as passing through other billiard balls rather than transferring motion to them. The connection between pain and its effects given that same assumption must therefore be non-trivial.

The claim that it is inconceivable—even though not analytically false—that pain has a different causal power assuming it has *some* power can then be combined with additional arguments in support of this qualifying assumption, such as standard arguments for realism about causal powers in general,² to support that pain really necessitates its effects, in an intelligible way, as per the phenomenal powers view.

Another argument for the view is the evolutionary argument (Mørch 2017). According to this argument, it seems like a fortunate coincidence that evolution has correlated pain with harmful stimuli, such as burning or suffocation, and pleasure with

¹ These tryings or efforts should be understood as mental events that might of course in turn fail to produce successful actions – more on this below.

² For example, arguments that realism about causal powers is the default common sense view, or the only view that does not render it an incredible “cosmic coincidence” that the world is regular, and that the main Humean argument against it—that causal powers are not positively conceivable—is undermined precisely by how we seem able to positively conceive of how pain would metaphysically necessitate avoidance.

beneficial stimuli, such as eating and breathing, rather than the other way around. It then claims that phenomenal powers view is the only view that removes the coincidence, and should therefore be accepted by an inference to the best explanation for these correlations.

If the phenomenal powers view can solve the meta-problem challenge, one could construct an additional argument with a similar structure as the evolutionary argument. According to this argument, it seems like a fortunate coincidence that problem intuitions are caused by consciousness and not by something else, and the phenomenal powers view is the only (or at least one of the few) views that removes this coincidence. But how exactly would it remove it?

3 The Phenomenal Powers View and the Meta-Problem

According to Chalmers, the most promising general answer to challenge is *realizationism*. This view claims that consciousness, or its phenomenal properties, is directly involved in realizing the meta-processes by playing some of its constitutive causal roles. That is, phenomenal properties, together with background conditions (such as the right kind of cognitive structures), simply cause the problem intuitions (as opposed being correlated with them in other ways, such as by having a common cause). *Prima facie*, this renders the connection between consciousness and problem intuitions non-coincidental. But according to Chalmers, it fails to completely eliminate the coincidence.

First, given realizationism, it may seem *nomologically* possible for problem intuitions to be caused not only by phenomenal properties (together with background conditions) but also by other things, such as the mechanisms posited by debunking explanations proposed by illusionists. If so, it seems like a coincidence that problem intuitions are in fact caused by consciousness given the actual laws of nature. Second, even if it is not nomologically possible for anything else than phenomenal properties to cause problem intuitions, it would still seem *metaphysically* possible, because the laws of nature (either the psychophysical laws, given dualism, or the physical laws, given physicalism) could have been different. Therefore, it is a coincidence that we have laws of nature such that consciousness, and only consciousness, causes problem intuitions.

In response to this, Chalmers suggests that:

One way to go further is to develop a view where *only* consciousness could realize the relevant meta-problem processes, perhaps given certain constraints. For example, on the “phenomenal powers” view put forward by Mørch (2018), phenomenal states are causal powers as part of their nature. On a strong version of this view, certain causal powers are essentially phenomenal powers, and the relevant causal roles could not be played without consciousness. On a view like this, it need not be a coincidence that the relevant judgments are brought about by consciousness. (Chalmers 2019: 48-49)

To paraphrase, given the phenomenal powers view, phenomenal properties, or at least certain kinds of them in combination with certain background conditions, could

metaphysically necessitate problem intuitions—in the same way pain necessitates avoidance attempts. One might also suppose that only phenomenal properties have this power. This would completely eliminate the coincidence.

But it might not be clear that the phenomenal powers view can be extended in this way. First of all, one might question whether a conceivability argument of the kind that supports a necessary connection between pain and avoidance could also support a necessary connection between phenomenal properties and problem intuitions. And even if it could, an additional argument is needed to support that *only* phenomenal properties metaphysically necessitate problem intuitions, i.e. that physical or other non-phenomenal properties could not necessitate them too. I will now propose some responses to both these concerns.

4 The Connection between Phenomenal Properties and Problem Intuitions

Can the connection between phenomenal properties and problem intuitions be supported in the same way as the connection between pain and avoidance? This concern might be most plausibly answered by appeal to a view developed by Harold Langsam (Langsam 2011). Langsam defends a view very similar to the phenomenal powers view.³ His overall view is that “consciousness is intelligible: there are substantive facts about consciousness that can be known a priori” (2011: 2). Among these facts are facts about the causal powers of consciousness: conscious states have “intelligible causal powers” (2011: 73), or powers that “flow in an intelligible way from the relevant intrinsic features of consciousness” (2011: 4). These powers include pain’s power to cause the desire⁴ to avoid it, as well as the power of phenomenal properties more generally to cause beliefs. The content of these beliefs is dependent on where we turn our *attention* (2011: 109-110).

According to Langsam, attention is naturally directed outward to the external world, and when it is, phenomenal properties, or at least sensory qualities such as phenomenal redness or blueness, will intelligibly cause beliefs that external objects with corresponding properties exist. For example, given outward attention, phenomenal redness makes us believe that physically red objects exist.⁵ But with some effort, consciousness can also be directed “inward”, as in introspection. When it is, conscious states will intelligibly cause beliefs about the existence and nature of

³ In previous work I have overlooked and failed to acknowledge these similarities. There are some minor differences between my view and Langsam, for example, I claim that pain causes *efforts* or *tryings* to avoid it whereas he claims they cause *desires*. But there are more significant differences in how we defend it (for example, Langsam does not invoke a conceivability argument but rather appeals to more general phenomenological reflection) and what we take it to imply (for example, I have argued it strongly supports panpsychism (as will also be discussed below)).

⁴ In contrast, I claim that pain intelligibly causes *efforts* or *tryings* to avoid it (in my view, desires are constituted by rather than distinct effects of pain) (see above footnote).

⁵ In my own view, these beliefs are strictly speaking false, as the beliefs would have to attribute redness in a naïve realist or Edenic (Chalmers 2006) sense, and we have good reason to believe that no such properties are really instantiated. But it seems that even those who are convinced by theoretical arguments that Edenic redness is not real, can still simultaneously believe it *is* real on some other psychological level.

phenomenal properties themselves. For example, phenomenal redness will, when attention is directed inwardly and towards it, make us believe that phenomenal redness is instantiated and has a particular qualitative nature. If the nature of phenomenal properties according to these beliefs is very different from the nature of physical properties according to our typical beliefs about them, this would go a long way toward explaining our problem intuitions.

In summary, one might claim that phenomenal properties together with the background condition of *inwardly directed attention* metaphysically necessitate beliefs that, in combination with typical physical beliefs, explain problem intuitions.

Could this claim be supported by a conceivability argument? Is it conceivable that phenomenal properties—when introspectively attended to—fail to make subjects believe they exist and have a qualitative nature (in the absence of interference from other motives or beliefs, such as beliefs that illusionism or other incompatible positions must be true)—given (as before) that they have *some* power? To me, this is not clearly conceivable, but it is still not as clearly inconceivable as the corresponding scenario about pain.

Part of the problem is that it is hard to get a clear idea of what exactly attention is, and what it means to direct it inward as opposed to outward.⁶ Another problem might derive from the relevant notion of belief. Beliefs are often defined purely functionally or structurally, but they can also be understood to include a qualitative component of cognitive phenomenology (see Bayne and Montague 2011). The phenomenal powers view would suggest that the cognitive phenomenology of beliefs grounds their powers and functional structure in the same way the phenomenology of pain grounds its respective powers and functional structure. But cognitive phenomenology is a notoriously elusive phenomenon: some philosophers claim it is clearly present in their experience, while others deny that it seems to exist at all. With the difficulty involved in ascertaining whether it seems to exist at all, it makes sense that it would also be difficult to ascertain whether it can conceivably not follow from its causes.

However, closer phenomenological and other kinds of philosophical investigation of the nature both attention and the phenomenology of belief could perhaps make the inconceivability claim easier to evaluate. It might also reveal that further background conditions must be specified in order to make it plausible. Until then a solution to the meta-problem in terms of the phenomenal powers view will have to rely heavily on extrapolation from the pain case, and remain somewhat schematic. But Langsam's ideas give at least some independent reason to believe it can be extended as the solution requires.

One might object that even if this connection were to demonstrably hold, it could only hold between phenomenal properties and problem intuitions (or beliefs) understood as purely mental phenomena, but problem intuitions should be defined in topic-neutral

⁶ I assume inward attention must be regarded as a sophisticated cognitive ability that is perhaps (so far) only to be found in humans, which would explain why animals (and other less complex conscious beings, if any) presumably do not have problem intuitions.

terms that do not presuppose the existence of mental phenomena at all.⁷ Rather, problem intuitions should be understood as physical or at least functional structures. This touches on a general problem for the phenomenal powers view, namely that it only seems to account for the powers of phenomenal properties to produce other phenomenal properties—in the case of pain, for example, it only seems inconceivable that pain fails to cause *tryings* or *efforts* toward avoidance; it seems fully conceivable that these efforts fail to produce successful physical actions, even stipulating the absence of interference. I do not have the space to discuss solutions to this problem here, but I will briefly say that it would most probably involve combining the view with Russellian panpsychism, a view to be discussed in more detail below, which claims that physical properties just *are* relations between phenomenal properties. Alternatively, one could fall back on the position that there is no fully topic-neutral solution to the meta-problem, so a non-topic-neutral one will have to do.⁸

5 Other Causes of Problem Intuitions

Granted that phenomenal properties necessitate problem intuitions given background conditions along the lines just proposed, how could it be ruled out that physical or otherwise non-phenomenal properties might also necessitate them?

If one accepts the existence of non-phenomenal causal powers, it is hard to see how one could plausibly rule out the possibility that some of them could also produce problem intuitions.⁹ So, as far as I can see, the only way of ruling this out is would be to deny the existence of non-phenomenal powers altogether—by adopting a kind of panpsychism according to which all causal powers are phenomenal powers.

This might sound extreme, but in recent years a number of philosophers (Chalmers included) have defended panpsychism as a solution to the mind–body problem that may avoid the main problems of both physicalism and dualism at once (Strawson 2006; Chalmers 2013; Goff 2017). In other work (Mørch 2018), I have also shown that the phenomenal powers view can be used as a premise in an additional, complementary argument for panpsychism. Briefly summarized, according to this argument, the only causal powers we can know or positively conceive of are phenomenal powers, we have no reason to posit unknown or positively inconceivable kinds of powers (at least given that there is a positively conceivable phenomenal alternative); therefore, all things with causal powers have phenomenal properties.

Here, I will not consider objections either to this argument or to panpsychism as such (for this, see the works just cited). But I will consider a different kind of objection, namely that invoking panpsychism as part of a response to the meta-problem based on

⁷ Thanks to François Kammerer for this objection.

⁸ Thanks to François Kammerer for (very conveniently) also suggesting this response.

⁹ One *prima facie* simple option would be to argue that it is implausible that there can be phenomenal and non-phenomenal powers directed toward the exact same effects, but debunking explanations would cast doubt on this.

the phenomenal powers view actually renders the phenomenal powers view redundant.

The particular kind of panpsychism which has been defended as a solution to the mind–body problem is known as Russellian panpsychism. According to this view, physics only tells us about structural or relational properties. But structures need realizers and relations need relata with intrinsic properties, and phenomenal properties are the only intrinsic properties we know or can positively conceive of. Therefore, Russellian panpsychists claim, phenomenal properties should be posited as the realizers of all physical structure or relata of all physical relations (a conclusion which can, as noted, be supported by additional arguments that it enables a solution to the mind–body problem).

But if phenomenal properties are the only properties that can realize physical structure, as Russellian panpsychism can be taken to suggest,¹⁰ it also follows that no non-phenomenal properties can realize the particular physical structure associated with problem intuitions. And even though Russellian panpsychism is compatible with the phenomenal powers view, it does not entail it. Russellian panpsychism might therefore seem to solve the meta-problem challenge by itself without the phenomenal powers view.

I think this objection can be addressed in at least two ways. First, Russellian panpsychism is compatible with the view that the laws of nature are contingent. Therefore, it allows that problem intuitions could be caused by any phenomenal properties with or without background conditions. For example, it allows that problem intuitions are caused by phenomenal properties that are not being inwardly attended to, and if so, the intuitions might seem unjustified. And if we suppose that there is cognitive phenomenology, as discussed above, it allows, for example, that problem intuitions are caused by the cognitive phenomenology of believing the premises of an arguments for illusionism, or other claims that clearly do not justify them. This leaves it coincidental that the problem intuitions are justified.

Second, even in a world where the laws of nature are such that problem intuitions are only caused by phenomenal properties and background conditions that justify them, Russellian panpsychism without phenomenal powers still faces what may be understood as an additional aspect of the meta-problem.

In some passages, Chalmers describes the meta-problem challenge as a kind of exclusion problem according to which the structure of the meta-processes sufficiently explain the problem intuitions, rendering the realizers redundant. For example:

One may still worry about whether [consciousness] plays a central enough role, not least because the structure of the processes may seem to explain our intuitions even without consciousness. (Chalmers 2019: 42)

¹⁰ Some Russellian panpsychists only hold that physical structure is *in fact* realized by phenomenal properties, leaving it open whether it can be non-phenomenally realized in other possible worlds. But it could be argued that if non-phenomenal realizers are not positively conceivable, there is no reason to think they are possible.

It is easy to get the sense that what really explains the intuitions is the structure of cognitive processes, and the fact that consciousness is connected to that structure is something of a fortunate and optional extra. (Chalmers 2019: 48)

There are two ways to interpret this. First, the problem could simply be that for any multiply realizable structure, any particular realizer is redundant because it could always be replaced by another realizer—and to this extent it seems coincidental that the structure is realized by one of these realizers and not another, as before. But the problem could also be that even in non-multiply realizable structures, the structure is not *explained* by realizers, but rather by fundamental regularities or laws which dictate that these particular realizers behave in a way that result in this particular structure. So, what really explains the structure (or its particular shape) is the shape of the fundamental laws, not the nature of the realizers.

The latter problem is very similar to a problem that is sometimes raised (e.g. by Howell 2015) for Russellian panpsychism's claim to avoid the main problem of dualism, the problem of mental causation. According to Russellian panpsychism, fundamental phenomenal properties are explanatorily relevant to the physical world, not as interacting causes, but as the realizers of physical structure. But the particular shape of physical structure seems independently fixed by fundamental laws. For example, there may be a fundamental law such that electrons repel each other. This law could hold regardless of whether the intrinsic nature of the electrons is phenomenal red, phenomenal green, or any unknown microphenomenal property. Thus the particular phenomenal character of these properties does not seem to matter to the physical world, all that matters is that there are some intrinsic properties around to realize physical structure and for the laws to apply to. Phenomenal properties thereby seem explanatorily relevant to the physical world only *qua* intrinsic not *qua* phenomenal.

Russellian panpsychism could therefore not solve the exclusion problem for meta-structures and their realizers without solving its own more general exclusion problem for any physical structure (or the laws that determine it) and their realizers. The phenomenal powers view, however, can solve both. On this view, physical structure is explained by its phenomenal realizers *qua* phenomenal. For example, if a painlike phenomenal realizer is replaced by pleasurelike one, the structure will change from one of repulsion to one of attraction. Similarly, if one type of cognitive phenomenology is switched with another, the structure might change from a meta-structure producing problem intuitions to, for example, a structure producing the intuition that there is no problem. Put another way, the laws that explain physical structures are not fundamental, but grounded in phenomenal powers, and by changing phenomenal properties one also changes the laws and thereby the structures.

To sum up, the claim that *only* phenomenal properties can cause problem intuitions will probably have to be supported by a kind of panpsychism, which is compatible with (and supported by) but does not entail the phenomenal powers view. One might think panpsychism could support this claim all by itself, rendering the phenomenal

powers view redundant. But panpsychism alone is compatible with problem intuitions being caused by the wrong kinds of phenomenal properties and/or background conditions, kinds that do not justify them, leaving it coincidental that they are in fact justified. It also arguably faces an exclusion problem between physical structure and its phenomenal realizers, meaning it does nothing to solve a similar exclusion problem that may be understood as an aspect of the meta-problem, between cognitive meta-structure and its phenomenal realizers. The phenomenal powers view ensures—assuming it can be extended roughly as proposed above—that problem intuitions can only be caused by the right kind of phenomenal properties and background conditions. It also solves the exclusion problem because on this view physical structure, including meta-structure, is grounded in and explained by phenomenal powers and so not possibly explanatorily excluded by it.

In this way, the phenomenal powers view can offer a solution to the meta-problem for realist views of consciousness, and thereby strengthen the case against illusionism. Insofar as the phenomenal powers view might be one of the few realist views able to solve the problem, this would also constitute an additional argument for the view.

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