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The Explanatory Gap: 30 years after

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Abstract

Thirty years ago, in a now classic paper, Joseph Levine (1983) explicitly outlined the difficulties physicalism encounters when confronting the qualitative aspect of mental states. In the present article, I wish to present the main directions materialists took in responding to these difficulties, arguing that the most popular contemporary theories of consciousness avoid confronting directly the “hard problem” of phenomenal experiences (Chalmers, 1995). One possible solution, of course, is to take conscious experience as a fundamental brute fact of the universe we inhabit, but in doing so the boundaries of psychology become ill defined and unclear.

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1. Introduction

Why is there a universe rather than nothing? What was there before the universe began? What is the meaning of life? These questions have fascinated philosophers, scientists and lay people alike for hundreds of years and will continue most probably to excite our minds for hundreds of years to come. One particular and important question, however, is missing from the previous list, namely - the central, intractable problem of consciousness. The mind-body problem, as it came to be known in the philosophy of mind literature, is at its core a problem of identifying an empirically adequate meeting point between the physical extensions of our brains and bodies and the apparently non-physical mind. To use Willfrid Sellars famous distinction (Sellars, 1962), there seems to be an irreconcilable

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conflict between the *Manifest Image* of colours, sounds, smells, desires and beliefs and the world of atoms, molecules and fields described by modern physical science. Indeed, while we frequently think of the world in terms of intrinsic qualitative experiences, viz. the ineffable “what is like” (Nagel, 1974) quality of “phenomenal consciousness” (Block, 1995), science tells us that the fundamental ontological bricks of the universe are quarks, leptons and their antiparticles, along with force carriers, all trapped together in the “cement” of causality. Needless to say, in such a world, there is no room for mental properties, as everything ultimately depends on the microphysical structures and dynamics of purely material entities.

Empirical psychology, as it evolved in the 20th century, especially after J.B. Watson’s famous “Behaviourist Manifesto” (Watson, 1913), has largely ignored deep metaphysical questions about the mind, leaving such issues open to debate only to philosophers or neuroscientists. The “mechanical mind” thesis, as Tim Crane (2003) called it, crystallized within cognitive psychology in the late 1950s, continuing Thomas Hobbes perspective that “life is but a movement of limbs” (Hobbes, 1901, p.1) and all we have to do in order to understand the universe is find the correct law-like relations that hold between entities. Fueled by advancements made in the realm of electronics and computer technology, cognitive psychology then postulated that what the human brain does is essentially a process of systematic manipulation of symbols (i.e. functioning at the level of syntax) similar to the workings of a Turing Machine. While this perspective has come under attack in the last three decades (e.g. Block, 1978; Searle, 1980), the computational theory of the mind remains today the dominant paradigm, although it is quite clear that some aspects of the mind, such as qualitative experiences (i.e. qualia), resist functional definitions and mechanical understanding. After this somehow lengthy introduction, I maintain that my purpose in this paper will be twofold: first, I wish to provide a short review of the philosophical positions that have been advanced by materialists in the last three decades in order to resolve (or dissolve) the phenomenal consciousness problem. Secondly, I wish to offer a brief sketch of an argument of why most research programs preoccupied with the central issue of consciousness do not actually confront the problem directly. If we take psychology to be a science concerned only with the implementation level of the mind, as most cognitive scientists certainly take it, this may not have profound consequences. However, if we consider phenomenal qualities and subjectivity as a mark of the mental, it follows that we have no good explanation of why we are conscious entities and not simple mechanical automata or, to use the jargon of analytical philosophy, why we are not “zombies” (Chalmers, 1996). Structurally, I will begin this inquiry by discussing what the “explanatory gap” (Levine, 1983) means and why the phenomenal character of experience (qualia) is the central point of the debate.

2. The Explanatory gap

Three decades ago, in a now classic paper, Joseph Levine (1983) introduced the so-called “explanatory gap” in order to name the difficulties materialist metaphysics like physicalism encounter when facing the qualitative aspect of mental states. The thing that made his paper the more important is that Levine himself was a materialist and after exposing why functionalist positions won’t solve the issue either, he concluded that most physicalists will probably retreat to a type-identity theory when confronting such issues. However, even if “some psycho-physical identity statements are true, we can’t determine exactly which ones are true” (Levine, 1983, p.359). Ultimately, Levine’s highly problematic epistemological argument leads to an unhappy consequence: the physicalist can either eliminate qualia (i.e. intrinsically qualitative ineffable mental states) altogether or face defeat (Levine, 1983).

Barring this in mind it is natural to ask ourselves whether or not some progresses have been made in the last 30 years in respect to this highly problematic issue. The blunt and short answer, I think, is definitely “no”. The explanatory gap, slowly transformed in what David Chalmers called the “hard problem of consciousness” (Chalmers, 1995) and it is here to stay with us, as no current physical or biological theory can even attempt to solve it. With this being said, in the following sections I will try to examine why we haven’t abandoned our hopes yet and why I believe many materialist scientists and philosophers are still optimistic about finding an answer. As space is not sufficiently generous here for a comprehensive review of the literature, I will attempt only to offer a brief outline of the most popular directions and research programs that tackled the problem in the last three decades, underlying the fact that not even current endeavours aim directly at the heart of the issue.

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