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Adjusting our epistemic expectations: Explaining experience with nonreductive psychophysical laws

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Since Chalmers (1995) seminal paper on consciousness, many have argued for or against its hard problem - subjective experience. Earp (2012) agrees there is a hard problem, but argues against Chalmers' supposed proposition that positing phenomenal properties of experience, or qualia, as brute counts as explaining them. Unfortunately, this is not Chalmers' proposal. Chalmers does indeed propose that qualia should be taken as fundamental, but he does not argue that their nonreducible metaphysical status confers their explanation. Instead, taking them to be brute is necessary to begin to empirically study and understand the psychophysical laws governing the relations between physical mechanisms and their corresponding nonphysical phenomenal properties. Chalmers makes this point clear in the paper Earp cites heavily from:

“Where there is a fundamental property, there are fundamental laws. A nonreductive theory of experience will add new principles to the furniture of the basic laws of nature. These basic principles will ultimately carry the explanatory burden in a theory of consciousness” (Chalmers, 1995, p.210)

Earp wants an answer to why something physical can produce something experiential, and states that to explain something is “(at minimum) to give an account of its nature or existence by referring to some other existing thing, reductively or otherwise” (Earp, 2012, p.18). But this is exactly what Chalmers proposes to do. Experience would be explained by referring to laws, or prin-

ciples, that nonreductively, but systematically link neural activity to experience. As for why something physical can produce experience, Chalmers offers the beginning of an answer with his principle of organizational invariance, stating “any two systems with the same fine-grained functional organization will have qualitatively identical experiences” (Chalmers, 1995, p.214). It is something about the function neural activity instantiates that causes experience. Does the principle tell us what overarching thing about function is relevant, or why certain functional states like hunger or fear cause their respective experiences? No. But we should not expect Chalmers to provide those answers *a priori*. These research questions demand empirical answers.

Earp makes reference to Chalmers' psychophysical principle of structural coherence – the structure of experience parallels the structure of awareness. But Earp considers this an “easy” explanation, unlike his sought after “hard” explanation for why something physical produces something experiential. This distinction is pointless, as I have argued Chalmers is offering the explanation Earp seeks, but it is nascent. Even if Earp accepts this point, he may still consider the laws Chalmers proposes as not offering “epistemic satisfaction,” the feeling of understanding (Campbell, 2009). Epistemic satisfaction is troublesome as the feeling is above all subjective. I could find that psychophysical laws perfectly

explain experience and exclaim “Eureka!”

As for Earp’s appeal to epistemic satisfaction, he does not suggest how a satisfactory explanation would look like. Secondly, should the epistemic satisfaction we expect for reductive explanations of physical phenomena generalize to nonreductive explanations of nonphysical qualia? There is no reason to think so, especially if epistemic satisfaction usually applies to cases of physical reductionism. Indeed, why should we insofar as experience seems to be the set of phenomena most resistant to explanation – hence, the hard problem.

Since Chalmers endorses the existence of psychophysical laws, could these laws be explanatory? More generally, do laws have explanatory power? To the extent that Chalmers’ proposed psychophysical laws will supervene on physical and phenomenal properties, we could approach their explanatory power from a Humean perspective. Loewer (2012) and Hicks and van Elswyk (2015) have argued that laws scientifically “explain their instances by showing their natural unity and similarity” (p.436).

If experience is nonphysical and psychophysical laws are offered as an explanation, then it seems that we can indeed explain experience. Hence, we should adjust our expectations for epistemic satisfaction – that is, nonreducible psychophysical laws seem capable of being epistemically satisfactory.

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