



David Chalmers's Theory of Consciousness: Reassessing the Hard Problem in Contemporary Thought

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Abstract

The question of consciousness remains one of the most challenging issues in contemporary philosophy. David Chalmers has transformed the issue through his formulation of the "Hard Problem of Consciousness," which distinguishes subjective experience from cognitive and behavioral functions. Chalmers's philosophy of consciousness, focusing on the explanatory gap between physical processes and phenomenal experience. It analyzes reductive materialism, explores his concept of naturalistic dualism, and evaluates major criticisms from functionalist perspectives. The study continues to provide an indispensable framework for understanding consciousness and the limitations of contemporary scientific explanations.

Keywords: Consciousness, Naturalistic Dualism, Philosophy of Mind, Phenomenal Experience

1. Introduction

Consciousness occupies a central position in philosophical inquiry because it concerns the very nature of subjective experience. While neuroscience has achieved remarkable progress in explaining cognitive functions and neural mechanisms. David Chalmers emerged as a leading figure in this debate by introducing the distinction between the "easy problems" and the "hard problem" of consciousness. According to Chalmers, explaining perception, memory, attention, and behavior constitutes the easy problems because they can be investigated through functional and neuroscientific methods. However, the hard problem concerns the existence of subjective experience. For example there is "something it is like" to perceive colors, feel pain, or experience emotions. This distinction has profoundly influenced contemporary philosophy of mind and consciousness studies.

Before Chalmers, many philosophers and scientists believed that consciousness could eventually be explained entirely through neuroscience. Materialist philosophers argued that mental states are nothing more than brain states. However, Chalmers challenged this assumption by claiming that even complete knowledge of brain processes leaves unanswered the question of why these processes are accompanied by subjective experience. Thomas Nagel sees the problem as turning on the "subjectivity" of conscious mental states (1974, 1986). He argues that the facts about conscious states are inherently subjective they can only be fully grasped from limited types of viewpoints. Thus, the facts about consciousness elude science and so make "the mind-body problem really intractable" (Nagel 1974, 435). The consciousness as a central philosophical issue and inspired extensive interdisciplinary research in philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence.



International Journal of Philosophy, Ethics and Humanities (IJOPEH)

Volume 1 | Issue 1 | 2026 | Article ID: 1719-4305-2512 | <https://doi.org/10.64823/ijpeh.2601006>

IORO Publications · Texas, USA · www.ioro.org

2. Literature Review

Chalmers's framework synthesizes and sharpens several themes in late 20th-century philosophy of mind. Nagel stresses that facts about conscious states are essentially perspectival, challenging third-person capture [2]. Levine argues that physical explanations fail to entail phenomenal facts, leaving a conceptual gap even where correlations are known [3]. Block distinguishes access consciousness (availability for report and control) from phenomenal consciousness

2.1 Qualia and Subjective Experience "Qualia" names the qualitative character of experience—the redness of red, the bitterness of coffee, the ache of pain [9], [13]. These are directly accessible from the first-person perspective and resist full capture by objective description. Nagel's "What is it like to be a bat?" crystallizes the gap between objective facts and subjective character

2.2 The Zombie Argument Chalmers's zombie conceivability thesis proposes that a world physically identical to ours yet devoid of consciousness is coherent; if conceivability is a guide to metaphysical possibility, physicalism is false or at least incomplete [1], [11]. Critics challenge the conceivability–possibility bridge and argue that improved conceptual or empirical understanding could dissolve the appearance of possibility

3. Methodology

1. Clarification: Disambiguates "easy" versus "hard" problems, access versus phenomenal consciousness, and the sense of "explanatory gap."
2. Argument reconstruction: Presents core arguments (hard problem, qualia, zombies, naturalistic dualism) in standard premise–conclusion form.
3. Critical assessment: Surveys leading objections (functionalist, neuroscientific optimism, anti-conceivability) and evaluates their force against Chalmers's position.
4. Comparative framing: Briefly situates Chalmers within broader traditions, including Indian philosophies of consciousness, to illuminate convergences and divergences. No empirical experiments are reported; the analysis synthesizes primary and secondary philosophical sources.

4. Results

1. Clarified target: The hard problem is conceptual-explanatory, not merely empirical; solving easy problems leaves open why there is something it is like [1], [3].
2. Irreducibility pressure: Qualia examples and knowledge arguments maintain pressure against pure reduction; structural-functional entailment seems insufficient for phenomenal facts [2], [7], [10].
3. Zombie upshot: If zombies are conceivable in the relevant sense, physicalism lacks metaphysical necessity; at minimum, phenomenal truths are not a priori deducible from physical truths [1], [11].
4. Naturalistic dualism: Treating experience as fundamental suggests adding psychophysical principles linking physical states to phenomenal properties without positing Cartesian substances [1].
5. Live objections: Functionalist and neuroscientific replies aim to either deflate the hard problem or predict eventual explanatory closure; their success remains contested [5], [6], [8]–[12].
6. Contemporary reach: The framework structures debates in AI, NCC research, and virtual reality realism; it influences how we separate behavioral competence from sentience [1], [12], [14].

5. Discussion

A related distinction between psychological or “access” consciousness and the philosophically more relevant “phenomenal” consciousness has been introduced by Ned Block (Block, 1995). Levine argues that a good scientific explanation ought to *deductively entail* what it explains, allowing us to infer the presence of the target phenomenon from a statement of laws or mechanisms and initial conditions (Levine 2001, 74-76). Chalmers introduced the concept of the hard problem in the mid-1990s. The hard problem asks why physical processes occurring within the brain are accompanied by conscious experiences. Even if neuroscience successfully explains every neural mechanism. He also describes the explanatory gap between objective descriptions and subjective experience.

The easy problems are amenable to reductive enquiry. They are a of lower-level facts about the world, similar to how a clock's ability to tell time is a logical consequence of its clockwork and structure, or a hurricane being a logical consequence of the structures and functions of certain weather patterns. A clock, a hurricane, and the easy problems, are all the sum of their parts (as are most things (Wikipedia, Chalmers, David. 1996) problem is not merely empirical but conceptual. Scientific explanations generally describe structures, functions, and causal relations. Conscious experiences, however, possess a first-person qualitative character known as “qualia.” This challenge suggests that consciousness may require a fundamentally different explanatory thought process than those employed in traditional physical sciences. The hard problem is often illustrated by appealing to the logical possibility of inverted visible spectra. If there is no logical contradiction in supposing that one's colour vision could be inverted, it follows that mechanistic explanations of visual processing do not determine facts about what it is like to see colours. (Wikipedia). The experience of seeing red or feeling pain cannot be fully captured by descriptions of neural activity. Chalmers argues that no amount of functional explanation necessarily explains why such experiences occur.

Qualia and Subjective Experience

“The term “qualia” (singular: *quale* and pronounced “kwol-ay”) was introduced into the philosophical literature in its contemporary sense in 1929 by C. I. Lewis in a discussion of sense-data theory. As Lewis used the term, qualia were properties of sense-data themselves. In contemporary usage, the term has been broadened to refer more generally to properties of experience. Paradigm examples of experiences with qualia are perceptual experiences (including nonveridical perceptual experiences like hallucinations) and bodily sensations (such as pain, hunger, and itching). Emotions (like anger, envy, or fear) and moods (like euphoria, ennui, or anxiety) are also usually taken to have qualitative aspects.” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). A central component of Chalmers's philosophy is the concept of qualia. Qualia refer to the subjective qualities of experience, such as, the redness of red, the bitterness of coffee, or the sensation of pain. These experiences are directly accessible only from the first-person perspective. An early and influential discussion of the general problem that qualia pose for physicalism can be found in Thomas Nagel's seminal paper, “What is it like to be a Bat?” (Nagel 1974). Even with the entire physical database at one's fingertips, humans would not be able to fully perceive or understand a bat's sensory system, namely what it is like to “see” the world through sound (Nida-Rümelin, Martine, 2015). “Qualia are the subjective or qualitative properties of experiences. What it feels like, experientially, to see a red rose is different from what it feels like to see a yellow rose. Likewise for hearing a musical note played by a piano and hearing the same musical note played by a tuba. The qualia of these experiences are what give each of them its characteristic “feel” and also what distinguish them from one another.” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Chalmers contends that physical explanations describe objective structures but fail to account for subjective awareness. The explanatory gap arises because objective descriptions and subjective experiences belong to different

explanatory domains. Consequently, consciousness cannot be reduced entirely to physical processes. Mary is the second character put forward by Jackson in his article *Epiphenomenal Qualia*. The other is a gifted person called "Fred" who "has better colour vision than anyone else on record"; specifically, Fred can see two different colours of red where ordinary colour vision only. He would know exactly what the microscopic structure of ammonia must be; but he would be totally unable to predict that a substance with this structure must smell as ammonia does when it gets into the human nose. The utmost that he could predict on this subject would be that certain changes would take place in the mucous membrane, the olfactory nerves and so on. But he could not possibly know that these changes would be accompanied by the appearance of a smell in general or of the peculiar smell of ammonia in particular, unless someone told him so or he had smelled it for himself (Broad, C. D. 1925). This position challenges strong forms of physicalism that seek to identify consciousness exclusively with neural activity.

The Zombie Argument

One of Chalmers's most influential arguments is the philosophical zombie thought experiment. A philosophical zombie is a hypothetical being physically identical to a human but lacking conscious experience. According to Chalmers, one can coherently conceive of an entire zombie world, a world physically indistinguishable from this one but entirely lacking conscious experience. Since such a world is conceivable, Chalmers claims, it is metaphysically possible, which is all the argument requires. Chalmers writes: "Zombies are probably not naturally possible: they probably cannot exist in our world, with its laws of nature." (Chalmers, 2003). If such a creature is conceivable, Chalmers argues, then consciousness is not logically reducible to physical facts. Physical duplication alone would not guarantee phenomenal experience. Therefore, physical explanations appear insufficient for explaining consciousness. The outline structure of Chalmers's version of the zombie argument is as follows that according to physicalism, all that exists in our world (including consciousness) is physical; if physicalism is true, a metaphysically possible world in which all physical facts are the same as those of the actual world must contain everything that exists in our actual world. In particular, conscious experience must exist in such a possible world; Chalmers argues that we can conceive of a world physically indistinguishable from our world but in which there is no consciousness (a zombie world). From this it follows that such a world is metaphysically possible. Therefore, physicalism is false. It is a strong formulation of the zombie argument. There are other formulations of zombie-type arguments that follow the same general form. The premises of the general zombie argument are implied by the premises of all the specific zombie arguments. (Wikipedia, Philosophical Zombie). The zombie argument has generated extensive debate. Critics argue that conceivability does not imply metaphysical possibility. Nevertheless, the argument remains a significant challenge to reductive materialism and continues to shape contemporary discussions concerning consciousness.

Naturalistic Dualism

To address the limitations of physicalist explanations, Chalmers proposes a position known as naturalistic dualism. Unlike traditional Cartesian dualism, naturalistic dualism does not posit a separate mental substance. Instead, it maintains that consciousness is a fundamental feature of reality alongside physical properties. "An account of physical processes may solve some of the easy problems of consciousness, concerning the explanation of cognitive functions, but it can never explain the existence of conscious experience. At this point some are tempted to give up, holding that we will never have a theory of conscious experience. McGinn (1989), for example, argues that the problem is too hard for our limited minds; we are "cognitively closed" with respect to the phenomenon." (Rowlands, chapter 26.) According to this view, consciousness should be treated as a basic component of the natural world, similar to space, time, or mass.

Chalmers suggests that future scientific theories may require psychophysical laws that systematically connect physical processes with conscious experiences. David Chalmers suggest that a theory of consciousness should take experience as fundamental. We might add some entirely new nonphysical feature, from which experience can be derived, but it is hard to see what such a feature would be like. More likely, we will take experience itself as a fundamental feature of the world, alongside mass, charge, and space- time. If we take experience as fundamental, then we can go about the business of constructing a theory of experience.(Edited by Max Velmans, Susan Schneider , 2007).Naturalistic dualism attempts to preserve scientific inquiry while acknowledging the irreducibility of consciousness. It represents a middle path between strict materialism and traditional substance dualism.

Criticisms of Chalmers's Theory

Chalmers's philosophy has faced criticism from several directions. Functionalists argue that consciousness can ultimately be explained through information processing and cognitive functions. Daniel Dennett, for example, rejects the hard problem as a conceptual illusion generated by mistaken intuitions about consciousness. Other critics maintain that advances in neuroscience may eventually close the explanatory gap. They argue that current limitations reflect incomplete scientific knowledge rather than fundamental philosophical obstacles. Some philosophers also challenge the zombie argument, claiming that conceivability cannot establish metaphysical conclusions. From this perspective, consciousness may still be fully grounded in physical processes despite present explanatory difficulties. Critics argue that the Hard Problem may eventually be solved by advances in neuroscience; Consciousness could emerge from sufficiently complex computation; the explanatory gap may reflect limitations in current concepts rather than reality itself; Property dualism introduces unnecessary metaphysical entities; Panpsychism raises difficult questions regarding combinations of consciousness. Nevertheless, even critics often frame their positions in response to Chalmers's formulation of the Hard Problem, underscoring its enduring impact. Despite these criticisms, Chalmers's framework continues to stimulate productive debates and has inspired alternative theories such as psychiatrist integrated information theory, and various non-reductive approaches.

Contemporary Relevance

The significance of Chalmers's philosophy extends beyond traditional philosophy of mind. Contemporary discussions concerning artificial intelligence, machine consciousness, cognitive science, and neuroethics increasingly engage with the hard problem. As artificial intelligence systems become more sophisticated, questions arise concerning whether computational systems could possess genuine conscious experiences. Chalmers's distinction between functional behavior and phenomenal consciousness remains highly relevant in evaluating such possibilities. Furthermore, the hard problem continues to influence interdisciplinary research that seeks to bridge philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, and computer science. The implications of the Hard Problem are increasingly relevant in the context of Artificial Intelligence. If consciousness is a fundamental property rather than a functional byproduct, current silicon-based computational models may never achieve "sentience" regardless of their processing power. This necessitates a shift in neuroethical frameworks and the criteria used to evaluate machine agency. His view on the theory of consciousness remains one of the most influential frameworks in contemporary philosophy of mind. His formulation of the Hard Problem of Consciousness has reshaped debates across philosophy, cognitive science, neuroscience, artificial intelligence, psychology, and ethics. Rather than asking merely how the brain processes information, Chalmers asks why and how physical processes produce subjective experience or qualia. This question continues to guide interdisciplinary research and philosophical inquiry. Chalmers revitalized the mind-body debate by distinguishing the Easy Problems of consciousness such as perception, memory, and attention from

the Hard Problem, which concerns the existence of first-person subjective experience. This distinction has shifted philosophical discussions away from purely functional explanations toward deeper metaphysical questions. Today, almost every major theory of consciousness positions itself in relation to Chalmers's Hard Problem. Modern neuroscience has achieved remarkable success in identifying the Neural Correlates of Consciousness (NCC), yet these discoveries primarily explain where and when conscious experiences occur. The rapid development of artificial intelligence has made Chalmers's theory more relevant than ever. However, Chalmers argues that sophisticated information processing does not necessarily imply genuine conscious experience. Chalmers bridges philosophy and cognitive science by emphasizing that cognition alone cannot explain consciousness. Researchers increasingly acknowledge that explaining behavior does not automatically explain conscious experience.

Chalmers has recently extended his philosophy to virtual reality, arguing that virtual worlds may be genuinely real environments in which authentic experiences can occur. In his book *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*, he suggests that experiences within virtual environments can possess genuine value rather than being mere illusions. This perspective has important implications for the Digital identity, Virtual education, Meta-verse ethics, Human-computer interaction, Social relationships in digital environments. Chalmers's emphasis on subjective experience resonates with several traditions within Indian philosophy, while also highlighting significant differences. Comparative dialogue can be drawn with the Advaita Vedānta, where consciousness (cit) is regarded as the fundamental reality; Sāṃkhya, which distinguishes consciousness (puruṣa) from material nature (prakṛti) and Buddhist philosophy, which investigates the nature of awareness while rejecting a permanent self. Although Chalmers generally works within an analytic philosophical framework, his concern with irreducible conscious experience creates fruitful opportunities for comparative philosophy and contemporary Indian philosophical scholarship. Perhaps Chalmers's greatest contribution is methodological rather than doctrinal. By insisting that subjective experience demands explanation in its own right, he transformed consciousness studies from a peripheral philosophical topic into a central interdisciplinary field. His work has influenced philosophy, neuroscience, cognitive science, AI research, psychology, ethics, and digital technology, ensuring that the Hard Problem remains a foundational challenge for contemporary thought. The enduring significance of Chalmers's Hard Problem lies not in disproving physicalism but in demonstrating that contemporary philosophy, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence continue to lack a satisfactory explanation of phenomenal consciousness.

6. Conclusion

David Chalmers's philosophy of consciousness represents one of the most influential contributions to contemporary philosophy of mind. By distinguishing the hard problem from the easy problems of consciousness, he exposed fundamental limitations in reductive explanations of subjective experience. His arguments concerning qualia, philosophical zombies, and naturalistic dualism challenge conventional assumptions about the relationship between mind and matter. Although critics question both the formulation and implications of the hard problem, Chalmers's work continues to shape debates concerning consciousness, cognition, and human experience. Whether future scientific developments ultimately confirm or undermine his conclusions, the philosophical significance of the hard problem remains undeniable. Chalmers has ensured that consciousness remains a central issue in both philosophy and science, compelling scholars to reconsider the nature of subjective experience and the limits of human understanding.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks colleagues in the Department of Philosophy, Utkal University, for feedback on earlier drafts.

Funding

This research received no external funding.”

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

AI Usage Disclosure

AI Usage Disclosure An AI assistant was used for language editing and structural formatting; all content was reviewed and verified by the author.

Author Contributions

Use CRediT roles, e.g.: Conceptualization, methodology, analysis and writing—original draft — review and editing, I have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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