

CHALLENGES TO FUNCTIONALISM: PHILOSOPHICAL ZOMBIES, INVERTED QUALIA, AND THE EXPLANATORY GAP

Functionalism characterises mental states in causal terms. A common objection is that this characterisation does not capture the qualitative character of experiential states. Indeed, it is thought that physicalist forms of functionalism (and other physicalist theories of mind) do not account for our own inner experience of our mental states.

In this context, philosophers talk of 'qualia' ('raw feel'—a quality as it is immediately felt or perceived; the introspectible character of a mental state).

The Knowledge Argument

A person could know all the physical and functional states about a certain type of experience and still not know what it's like to have it.

During one of the webinars, we will consider your reading of Frank Jackson's thought-experiment (1982 and 1986): ***Mary's black and white world***.

Chinese Room Thought Experiment

The Chinese Room argument, devised by John Searle (1980), is an argument against the possibility of true artificial intelligence, but the argument also has implications for functionalist and computational theories of meaning and of mind. When we meet for a webinar, we will consider the ***systems reply*** and Searle's response.



'Inverted qualia'

Consider the possibility that two people could be functionally identical and yet have different qualia.

The inverted spectrum problem: it is possible that two people could have very different visual experiences when looking at the same colours. It seems possible that this could happen even though the two people are identical in every functional way.

So, there could be a person who satisfies the functional definition of our experience of red, but is experiencing green instead.

- Fred has experience x when looking at something red, and experience y when looking at something green. John has experience x when he looks at something green and y when he looks at something red. Both Fred and John will associate the word 'red' with red things, and 'green' with green things, even though they have different experiences of these colours. Fred and John could be so functionally similar that there would be no way to tell that they were having different qualia. Functionalism does not explain individual differences in qualia.

These challenges are well associated with Ned Block:

See Ned Block on Spectrum Inversion,

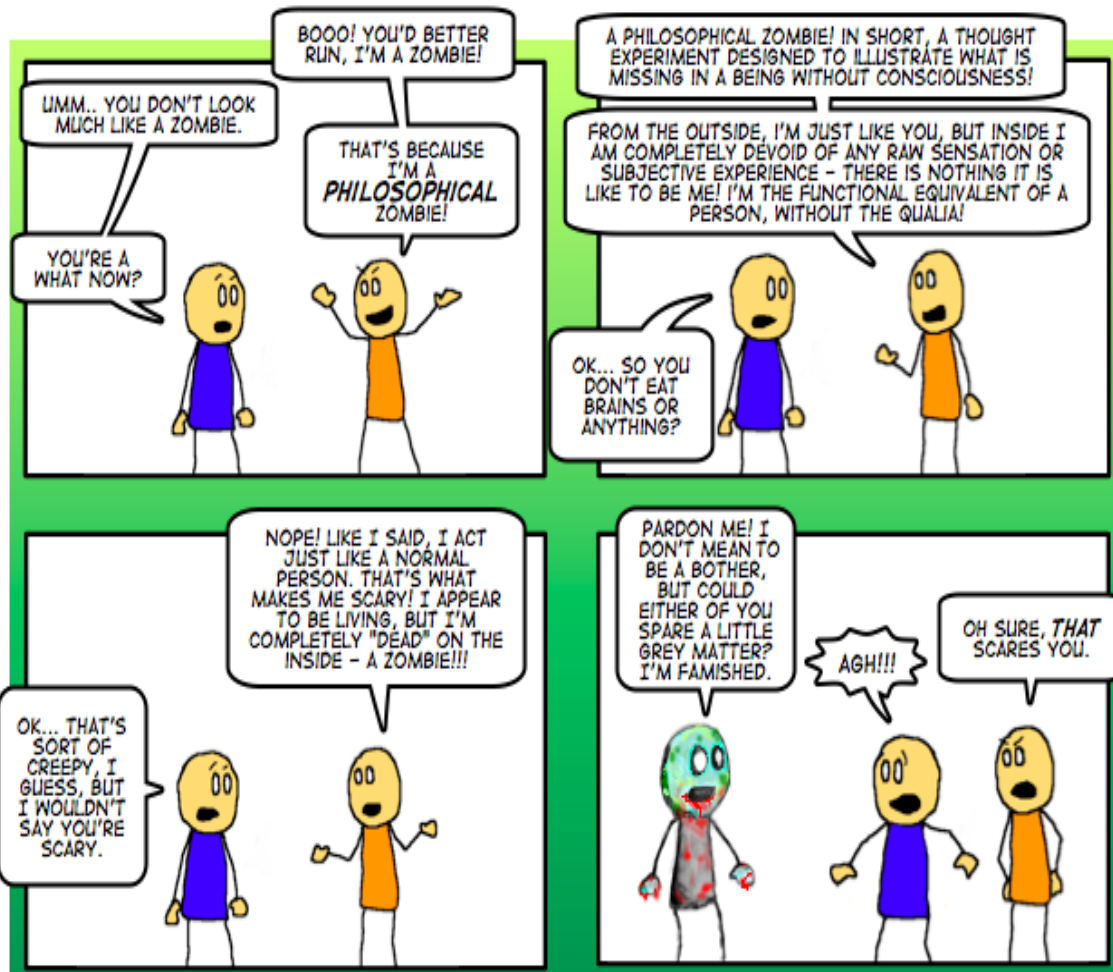
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MODer--msO8>

Reply

Functionalism does not account for qualia, but qualia isn't important in psychological explanation. Even though functionalism leaves out raw experience, it does not leave out sensations like pain, pleasure, etc; these are *defined* in terms of their *functional role rather than in terms of their* qualitative character.

'Absent qualia'

Functionalism doesn't capture conscious mental experience. Consider the possibility of organisms having all the organisational properties mentioned by Putnam without having any subjective experiences.



Chalmers's zombie argument

1. It's conceivable that there are molecule-for-molecule duplicates of oneself with no qualia (zombies).
2. Whatever is conceivable represents a real metaphysical possibility.
3. Zombies are possible.

Chalmers claims that '[T]he conceivability of zombies seems...obvious to me...While this possibility is probably empirically impossible, it certainly seems that a coherent situation is described; I can discern no contradiction in the description' (Chalmers 1996, p.96).

Reply

- The argument is valid, but the premises are problematic.
- Some deny that there could be beings with the functional organisation of normal human beings but which lack qualia.
- One could deny that what is said here to be conceivable is in fact conceivable. Daniel Dennett denies the coherence of the idea of functionally identical zombies: 'when philosophers claim that zombies are conceivable, they invariably underestimate the task of conception (or imagination) and end up imagining something that violates their own definition' (Dennett, 1995. p. 322).
- One could deny that conceivability entails possibility. It may be that some things just *seem* possible but aren't.

Related challenge

- Even if the absent-qualia objection does not show functionalism to be false, it is thought to open an 'explanatory gap' between phenomenal properties and brain properties (Levine, 1983, 1993 and 2001)

Eliminativism as a response to the challenges

Eliminativism about qualia: the view that denies the existence of irreducible *qualia*.

(See, for example, Dennett, 1988. Dennett's denial is related to a higher-order theory of mind. Higher-order theories will be discussed in a later session). But such a denial goes against ordinary experience and commonsense.

So why might one deny the existence of qualia?:

'Qualia include the ways things look, sound and smell, the way it feels to have a pain; more generally, what it's like to have mental states. Qualia are experiential properties of sensations, feelings, perceptions and, in my view, thoughts and desires as well. But, so defined, who could deny that qualia exist? Yet, the existence of qualia is controversial. Here is what is controversial: whether qualia, so defined, can be characterized in intentional, functional or purely cognitive terms. Opponents of qualia think that the content of experience is intentional content (like the content of thought), or that experiences are functionally definable, or that to have a qualitative state is to have a state that is monitored in a certain way or accompanied by a thought to the effect that I have that state. If we include the idea that experiential properties are not intentional or functional or purely cognitive in the definition of 'qualia', then it is controversial whether there are qualia.

This definition of 'qualia' is controversial in a respect familiar in philosophy. A technical term is often a locus of disagreement, and the warring parties will often disagree about what the important parameters of disagreement are. Dennett, for example, has supposed in some of his writings that it is of the essence of qualia to be non-relational, incorrigible (to believe one has one is to have one) and to have no scientific nature (see Flanagan, 1992, p.61). This is what you get when you let an opponent of qualia define the term. A proponent of qualia ought to allow that categorizations of them (beliefs about them) can be mistaken, and that science can investigate qualia. I think that we ought to allow that qualia might be physiological states, and that their scientific

nature might even turn out to be relational. Friends of qualia differ on whether or not they are physical. In my view, the most powerful arguments in favor of qualia actually presuppose a physicalistic doctrine, the supervenience of qualia on the brain' (Block, 2004).

Todd Griffith and Michael Byrne argue that eliminativism leaves many questions unanswered, as well as creates new ones, and does not solve or dissolve what Chalmers calls 'the hard problem' of consciousness (1996).

Many philosophers consider the elimination of qualia implausible, if not inconceivable. Nagel points out that human beings and other animals enjoy conscious experiences: 'there is something that it is like to *be* that organism – something it is like *for* that organism' (Nagel, 1974).

It is worth noting the more common version of eliminativism:

'The eliminativism perspective on qualia mirrors the eliminativist arguments for essentially all mental phenomena for which eliminativists currently lack a strong neural explanation: qualia do not need to be explained because they do not really exist. The belief that there are qualia is a vestige of the "folk psychological" viewpoint which will ultimately be eliminated when we develop a complete neuroscientific account of mind/brain' (Griffith and Byrne, 1996).

Such extreme eliminativism about psychological concepts is associated with the claim that folk psychology is false (this version of eliminativism advocates eliminating everyday psychological concepts in favour of neuroscientific ones). But this view is thought to be fraught with problems, not least because it appears to be self-refuting. It has the strange feature that if it is true, then it cannot be true that anyone believes it.

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