

# Philosophy of Mind: Essay 2

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What are the prospects for a scientific explanation of phenomenal consciousness?

The purpose of this essay is to provide an overview of the potential problems faced by a scientific explanation of phenomenal consciousness. Specifically, I will discuss the explanatory gap between phenomenal consciousness and objective descriptions of the brain. By addressing the explanatory gap, I will show that there may be no prospect for a scientific explanation of phenomenal consciousness. Additionally, I will suggest two potential paths for a future scientific explanation. Firstly, I will discuss Searle's (1992) argument for a first-person subjective ontology of consciousness. Furthermore, I will contrast differing materialist responses (Cavanna & Nani, 2014) to the ontological claims of Searle's argument. Secondly, I will expand on the missing subjectivity within a possible eliminative materialist response. I will show that the denial of an explanatory gap may allow for a scientific explanation of phenomenal consciousness. However, one must forgo an acknowledgement or understanding of qualia. Finally, I will conclude that any position which denies the patent existence of an explanatory gap may be an ignorant account of consciousness. I offer two prospective paths that may lead to a resolution between materialism and phenomenal consciousness.

Searle (1992) claims that one's mental phenomenology, namely consciousness, has an irreducibly first-person ontology (mode of existence). The following example will help explicate the underlying suggestions of this claim. The act of walking through the Barri Gòtic requires two presuppositions for it to be a phenomenal experience: it must be someone's experience, *and* this experience cannot be reduced to smaller parts. The experience of walking down the winding Gothic Quarter is not possible without an observer. Furthermore, the narrow surrounding of the medieval streets have a distinct phenomenal quality, which arguably cannot be explained using scientific methods of reduction (Jackson, 1982; Levine, 1983; Nagel, 1974; Sturgeon, 1994). I will refer to the phenomenal quality of first-person experience as consciousness or qualia. Consciousness has a 'what it is like' and qualitative character to each experience. Nagel (1974) claims that the subjective phenomenal character of consciousness is not captured by any scientific analysis of the mental. A compelling explanatory gap is found between phenomenal consciousness and current scientific descriptions of the brain. Chalmers (1995) believes that fixing this explanatory gap is the 'hard problem' of consciousness. A prospective scientific explanation is not likely possible due to the patent gap in explanation between descriptions of the brain and consciousness. The potential incompatibility between scientific explanation and the subjective ontology of consciousness will be investigated below.

## Subjective ontology

Searle's (1992) claim that consciousness has a first-person ontology may not be compatible with the fundamental objective concern of science. In Searle's view, all attempts at understanding objective reality must be mediated by an observer's subjective ontology. In other words, consciousness is the fundamental epistemic basis for reaching reality. Moreover, observation is always *someone's* observation (Searle, 1992, p.99). In contrast to the first-person ontology of consciousness, third-person ontology is used in scientific explanations of objects that are independent of conscious beings. The method of scientific investigation aims to gain knowledge of objective reality through observation and experimentation. Moreover, the scientific method makes a distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. Science is *only* concerned with what is ontologically objective (Borchardt, 2004). Searle (1992) claims that consciousness is ontologically subjective. Many argue that phenomenal consciousness has a first-person ontology which possesses a special feature unseen in other natural phenomena, namely subjectivity (Chalmers, 1995; Jackson, 1982; Levine, 1983; Nagel, 1974; Searle, 1992; Sturgeon, 1994). Additionally, Searle (1992) claims that consciousness cannot exist independently of experience, due to its subjective nature. The metaphysical distinction between subjective and objective phenomena is problematic for attempts at scientific investigation of consciousness. Consequently, if science is only concerned with what is ontologically objective, and consciousness is unable to exist independently from its subjective ontology, an explanation of phenomenal consciousness cannot be achieved through science (Nagel, 1974).

A materialist response to Searle's (1992) argument would deny that subjectivity is a distinct mode of existence. Cavanna and Nani (2014) claim that the subjectivity of consciousness is epistemic rather than ontological. Any account of phenomenal consciousness derives from the same set of physical processes within the brain; whether it be a first-person experience or third-person description of the brain. In other words, it does not matter whether the description of consciousness is subjective or objective, as both descriptions are just different expressions of the same thing. Therefore, an exhaustive description of one's brain state and one's corresponding phenomenal experience are ontologically identical. Phenomenal changes in consciousness are necessarily connected to physical changes within the brain. For example, physical damage to the visual cortex will affect one's visual phenomenal experience. This covariance suggests that consciousness is ontologically dependent on the physical brain (Revonsuo, 2010). Cavanna and Nani (2014) argue that Searle (1992) describes a double epistemology, not a double ontology. If consciousness is ontologically identical to specified brain states, the totality of phenomenal experience could be adequately explained by an objective account. Consequently, a scientific explanation of consciousness would be possible.

On the other hand, many other theorists reinforce that all third-person accounts still fail to adequately fill the explanatory gap between phenomenal experience and brain states (Chalmers, 1995; Jackson, 1982; Levine, 1983; Nagel, 1974; Searle, 1992; Sturgeon, 1994). They claim that the subjectivity of consciousness is special or ontologically different to the objective modes of existence described by science. The special quality of phenomenal experience, sometimes referred to as '*qualia*' or '*what it is*

*like*', is exemplified in various thought experiments: Frank Jackson's Mary's Room (1982), John Searle's Chinese Room (1980), Thomas Nagel's 'What is it like to be a bat?' (1974) and David Chalmers' Philosophical Zombies (1995). Each of these thought experiments are predicated on the compelling assumption that there is something missing from an objective account of consciousness. Chalmers (1995) suggests that accounting for how and why this missing phenomenal experience exists is the 'hard problem' of consciousness. Searle (1992) argues that an exhaustive scientific account (based on current methods, assumptions and theory) would fail to solve this 'hard problem' due to the subjective nature of consciousness. However, a materialist response claims that a first-person description of phenomenal consciousness and a third-person account of the brain are ontologically identical (Cavanna & Nani, 2014). Therefore, a third-person account of the brain may be a sufficient description of phenomenal consciousness. In contrast, Chalmers (1995) and Searle (1992) argue that descriptions of the brain do not sufficiently explain, specifically, how neuronal firings and activation patterns give rise to phenomenal consciousness.

### **Filling in the gap**

The 'hard problem' concerns the evident gap between a third-person biological understanding of consciousness, and the distinctive first-person experience of consciousness. Due to the stark dissimilarity between the two accounts, some find it hard to deny the existence of an explanatory gap (Chalmers, 1995; Jackson, 1982; Levine, 1983; Nagel, 1974; Searle, 1992; Sturgeon, 1994). If the current methods and assumptions of science are unable to fill the explanatory gap between phenomenal consciousness and brain states, the following eliminative path may be considered.

The eliminative materialist denies the existence of any quality or 'what it is like' to be conscious. By denying that something is missing from an objective description of the brain, the 'hard problem' dissipates, and the explanatory gap is filled. The eliminative materialist position claims that one's introspective understanding of the mind is deeply mistaken. The position denies the existence of phenomenal mental states and their role in a complete account of consciousness (Churchland, 1981). Consequently, this view potentially permits a scientific explanation of consciousness. However, it forgoes an acknowledgement or understanding of qualia. Revonsuo (2010) accuses the eliminative materialist position of being one of the more implausible paths towards an account of consciousness. He believes this is an implausible approach as it leaves out the 'what it is like' phenomena of experience.

After an objective account of neuronal firings and other brain processing is comprehensively mapped, modelled and described, Chalmers maintains that there will always remain an unanswered question: '*Why are these mechanisms specifically accompanied by conscious experience?*' (Chalmers, 1995 p.204). If the patent gap in explanation still remains, a position of denial may be an ignorant path to understanding consciousness. Materialism is one of the fundamental assumptions of science (Borchardt, 2004). Therefore, phenomenal consciousness must be consistent with materialism for a scientific explanation to be plausible. Subsequently, if a materialist position is desired, one must either: give an account for why the 'hard problem' is an illusion, *or* radically expand materialism to incorporate consciousness as a fundamental material constituent.

## **Conclusion**

A materialist account of phenomenal consciousness is needed in order to fill the explanatory gap between first-person experience and third-person descriptions of the brain with a scientific explanation. Searle (1992) argues that the subjectivity of phenomenal consciousness is ontologically different to third-person descriptions of the brain. On the other hand, Cavanna and Nani (2014) claim that first-person and third-person descriptions are ontologically identical. The covariance between the brain and phenomenal experience, suggests that an exhaustive description of brain processors may be a sufficient account of phenomenal consciousness. Furthermore, the eliminative materialist forgoes an acknowledgement or understanding of qualia altogether. However, many others, including Chalmers (1995), believe that there is still something missing from a third-person account of the brain. Consequently, if phenomenal consciousness is still missing from an eliminative materialist's account, their position of denial may be an ignorant approach. It is extremely difficult to deny the existence of an explanatory gap when evaluating the evident dissimilarity between subjective and objective accounts of consciousness. Phenomenal consciousness seems to be inconsistent with the materialist assumption of science. A current scientific account of consciousness is inconceivable, due to the explanatory gap. Thus, a prospective scientific explanation of phenomenal consciousness must either show the 'hard problem' as an illusion, *or* radically expand materialism.

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