



Phenomenal Concepts and the Explanatory Gap

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Explaining Consciousness

- Consciousness: what it is like to be a sentient being.
 - Q: Can consciousness be explained in physical terms?
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The Epistemic Gap

- Let P = complete microphysical truth
 - Let Q = a truth about consciousness

 - Then there is an apparent *epistemic gap* between P and Q.
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Mary and Zombies

- Mary (in black-and-white room) could know P, without being able to deduce Q.
 - So $P \supset Q$ is not a priori
 - It is coherent to suppose that there are *zombies*: physical duplicates of us without consciousness.
 - So $P \& \sim Q$ is conceivable.
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The Explanatory Gap

- Many: the conceivability of $P \& \sim Q$ entails an *explanatory gap* between P and Q.
 - Why, given that P is the case, is Q the case?
 - Physical account is epistemically compatible with absence of consciousness, so doesn't wholly explain consciousness.
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Responses

- Dualist: infers ontological gap from epistemic gap
 - $P \& \sim Q$ is conceivable and possible
 - Type-A materialist: denies epistemic gap
 - $P \& \sim Q$ is not conceivable (and not possible)
 - Type-B materialist: accepts epistemic gap, denies ontological gap
 - $P \& \sim Q$ is conceivable but not possible.
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Type-B Materialism

- Type-B materialist:
 - conceptual dualism: phenomenal concepts fundamentally distinct from physical concepts
 - ontological monism: phenomenal properties are identical to (or constituted by) physical properties.
 - $P \supset Q$ is an a posteriori necessity
 - Many: $P^* = Q^*$ is an a posteriori identity
(where P^* =physical term, Q^* =phenomenal term)
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Kripkean Necessities?

- Analogy: Kripkean a posteriori necessities
 - Water=H₂O, etc
 - This doesn't help
 - All are false at a world considered as actual
 - Leads either to dualism or to Russellian “panprotopsychism”.
 - Type-B materialist needs primitive *strong necessities* instead.
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Phenomenal Concepts

- Alternative strategy: appeal to special features of *phenomenal concepts*
 - Gap stems from our concepts of consciousness, not consciousness itself
 - These concepts are unique in a way that yields epistemic gap
 - But they still refer to physical properties
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Proponents

- Proponents of this strategy include
 - Loar (1990): recognitional concepts
 - Hill (1997): independent conceptual role
 - Perry (2000): indexical concepts
 - Papineau (2002): quotational conceptsand others
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General Form

- Key: a thesis C about conceptual/psychological features of conscious beings, such that
 - (i) C explains our epistemic situation with respect to consciousness
 - (ii) C is explainable in physical terms
 - Not a direct explanation of consciousness.
 - Rather, an explanation of the explanatory gap!
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Counterargument

- I'll argue that no account can simultaneously satisfy (i) and (ii).
 - Either:
 - C is not physically explainable
 - or
 - C doesn't explain our epistemic situation (E).
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Key Question

- Question: Is $P \& \sim C$ conceivable?
 - E.g.: can we imagine zombies lacking C?
 - N.B. No assumption that zombies are possible.
 - Silicon zombies may suffice.
 - I' ll argue: problems either way.
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Master Argument

- (1) Either $P \& \sim C$ is conceivable or it is not.
- (2) If $P \& \sim C$ is conceivable, then C is not physically explicable.
- (3) If $P \& \sim C$ is not conceivable, then C cannot explain our epistemic situation.

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- (4) Either C is not physically explicable, or C cannot explain our epistemic situation.
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First Horn

- Premise 2: If $P \& \sim C$ is conceivable, then P is not physically explicable
 - Explanatory gap between P and C .
 - Analogous to original reasoning:
 - $P \& \sim Q$ conceivable, so explanatory gap between P and Q .
 - Phenomenal concepts pose as much of an explanatory gap as consciousness itself!
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Argument for Second Horn

- (5) If $P \& \sim C$ is not conceivable, then zombies satisfy C .
 - (6) Zombies do not share our epistemic situation.
 - (7) If zombies satisfy C but do not share our epistemic situation, then C cannot explain our epistemic situation.
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- (3) If $P \& \sim C$ is not conceivable, then C cannot explain our epistemic situation.
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Epistemic Situation

- Key premise: Zombies don't share our epistemic situation ($P \& \sim E$ is conceivable)
 - Epistemic situation E: includes truth-values and epistemic status of our beliefs, and epistemic connections among them.
 - Zombies satisfy E when their corresponding beliefs have the same truth-values, epistemic status, and epistemic connections.
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Zombie Epistemology

- Intuitively: if zombies have beliefs at all, they have a less accurate self-conception than we do.
 - Arguably: when a zombie says “I am phenomenally conscious”, it says something false
 - Zombie eliminativists are correct.
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Zombie Mary

- Clearer example: Zombie Mary.
 - When she looks at something red, does she gain knowledge analogous to Mary's?
 - No: any knowledge gained is much poorer
 - E.g. indexical knowledge, or know-how
 - No analog of lucid phenomenal knowledge
 - So: Zombie Mary's epistemic situation differs from Mary's.
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Upshot

- Zombies don't share the epistemic situation of conscious beings, but are epistemically impoverished.
 - $P \& \sim E$ is conceivable.
 - So argument goes through.
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Shorter Version

- (1) $P \& \sim E$ is conceivable
 - (2) If $P \& \sim E$ is conceivable, then $P \& \sim C$ is conceivable or $C \& \sim E$ is conceivable.
 - (3) If $P \& \sim C$ is conceivable, P cannot explain C .
 - (4) If $C \& \sim E$ is conceivable, C cannot explain E .
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- (5) P cannot explain C or C cannot explain E .
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Options for Type-B Materialists

- (1) Accept e-gap between P and C
 - (2) Accept e-gap between C and E
 - Back to ungrounded explanatory gaps.
 - (3) Hold that zombies are our epistemic twins, (with an analog of consciousness?)
 - Counterintuitive, doesn't capture zombie intuition.
 - (4) Deny that zombies are conceivable
 - Type-A materialism
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Applying the Dilemma

- Any given account of phenomenal concepts is either
 - “thin”: physically explicable, but doesn’t capture our epistemic situationor
 - “thick”: captures our epistemic situation, but isn’t physically explicable.
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Papineau's Account

- Papineau:
 - Phenomenal concepts are “quotational”
 - Concept tokens embed a phenomenal state R.
 - State = R, concept = “R”
 - That experience: R.
 - Can be read as either a thin or thick account.
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Thin Quotational Concepts

- Work “bottom-up” with physical materials.
 - Neural state N, gets embedded into token “N”, or “that state: N”.
 - We’d expect: mere indexical reference to N.
 - Intrinsic nature of N has no epistemic impact.
 - If different state M is embedded in functional duplicate, we’d expect same epistemic situation.
 - So: no substantive knowledge of N, akin to Mary’s knowledge of phenomenal character.
 - Doesn’t capture our epistemic situation.
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Thick Quotational Concepts

- Start “top-down” with conscious state Q.
 - Embed Q into token concept “Q”.
 - May expect: substantive knowledge of Q
 - But this requires special epistemic features of conscious states.
 - E.g., they are apt for direct acquaintance with intrinsic nature.
 - These features are not predictable from physical account.
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Other Accounts

- Loar's recognitional concepts
 - Either thin (demonstrative) or thick (substantive knowledge of nature)
 - Perry's indexical concepts
 - Thin (Mary's knowledge isn't just indexical)
 - Hill's independent conceptual roles
 - Thin (doesn't deliver substantive knowledge)
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Conclusion

- There's not just an explanatory gap between physical processes and consciousness.
 - There is also an explanatory gap between physical processes and phenomenal concepts.
 - So no account of phenomenal concepts can physically explain the explanatory gap.
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