

Summary

What It's Like, or What It's About? The Place of Consciousness in a Material World is both a survey of the contemporary debate and a defense of a distinctive position. Most philosophers nowadays assume that the focus of the philosophy of consciousness, its shared *explanandum*, is a certain property of experience variously called “phenomenal character,” “qualitative character,” “qualia” or “phenomenology,” understood in terms of what it is like to undergo the experience in question. Consciousness as defined in terms of its phenomenal aspect is often called “phenomenal consciousness.” The major issue that occupies most thinkers is whether this phenomenal character happens to be a physical property, or whether it is rather *sui generis*. Those who believe the former are materialists; those who conclude the latter are dualists. As the currently dominant metaphysic is materialism – also sometimes called physicalism – the challenge appears to be to slot phenomenal properties among the physical properties that ultimately make up the world. David Chalmers argued powerfully that we can go very far in situating many mental properties in the physical world – namely, the properties that can be understood in functional terms – but that phenomenal properties resist such a treatment. Chalmers calls this “the hard problem” of consciousness. But there are also some quite powerful positive arguments for dualism. The two most influential ones are the modal argument, also offered by Chalmers, and the knowledge argument invented by Frank Jackson. Chalmers invites us to conceive of creatures that are exactly like human beings – physically, functionally, behaviorally – only bereft of phenomenal consciousness. If such creatures are conceivable, says Chalmers, they are metaphysically possible. And if they are metaphysically possible, materialism is false. Jackson, for his part, suggests we imagine Mary who has spent her entire life inside a black-and-white room and has seen the world through a black-and-white TV screen. But she also happens to know everything there is to know about the physics of color. And yet, Jackson suggests that once Mary is finally released from her room and sees a lawn outside, she learns something new: that this is what it is like to experience green color. The current

work on consciousness is by and large characterized by attempts to answer these two dualistic arguments.

I try to make sense of the positions within the domain of philosophy of consciousness by means of two major distinctions that mutually intersect. First, there is a distinction between dualism and materialism. An apparent third alternative currently on offer, the so-called Russellian monism, is unstable, collapsing into either dualism (panpsychism) or materialism (Russellian physicalism). Materialism comes in two main flavors: either the a posteriori physicalism, which detects an epistemic gap between phenomenal and physical truths, hence denying that the former could be derived from the latter; or the a priori physicalism, which does not acknowledge any such obstacle. The second major distinction is between phenomenism and representationalism. It's true that Ned Block, who introduced this contrast, meant to distinguish between two kinds of materialism. But I believe that the distinction actually intersects the one between materialism and dualism. We thus arrive at a table with six slots, representing six main positions in the philosophy of consciousness: (1) dualist phenomenism (Chalmers, the early Jackson, and Tyler Burge); (2) dualist representationalism (René Descartes); (3) aposteriori materialist phenomenism (Block); (4) a posteriori materialist representationalism (Michael Tye, Fred Dretske, David Rosenthal); (5) a priori materialist phenomenism (David Lewis); and (6) a priori materialist representationalism (Daniel Dennett, Derk Pereboom).

However, this scheme is in fact somewhat misleading. It is true that Dennett is usually classified as an apriori materialist (or, more precisely an apriori materialist representationalist), but I believe that needs to be corrected. In order to understand why, I first analyze varieties of materialist representationalism in detail, in particular various construals of phenomenal character in terms of representation, or intentionality, which includes a discussion of the identity of its content (the issue of externalism). By contrast, Dennett rejects the concept of phenomenal character. Consciousness has no intrinsic, publicly inaccessible properties. On that ground, Dennett builds an empirical, fully functionalist theory of consciousness, which he also tries to integrate within a general Darwinian framework. From that

point of view, one can contrast Dennettian and representationalist views on the issue of animal consciousness. In addition to his rejection of phenomenal character, Dennett also abstains from the regular metaphysical departure point of regular materialism. He does not so much ask how an enigmatic property of consciousness fits an antecedently characterized world, but rather how far we can investigate all aspects of the world, including consciousness, using the scientific method. He is thus a methodological naturalist, rather than a metaphysical materialist.

While this approach removes obstacles to the science of consciousness, it does not solve what might be called “the hardest problem” – of intentionality, not phenomenal consciousness. The hardest problem consists in the fact that our intentional discourse involves conflicting commitments that prevent a coherent metaphysic of representational states. However, it does not follow that we should give up on this discourse as a theoretical means of reduction as well as a practical tool of explanation. But it might be that intentional discourse is a somewhat pseudo one.