CO4: Comments on Carruthers and Schier, 'Dissolving the hard problem of consciousness'

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In their interesting paper, Carruthers and Schier set out to dissolve worries about what David Chalmers calls the *hard problem of consciousness*, 'the problem of explaining…how and why…physical processes give rise to experience', in particular, how they give rise to an experience's phenomenal 'feel', or *what it's like* to have it. On Chalmers's view, they note, the hard problem cannot be solved: '[n]o matter how much we can say about the structure and function of the state [in question] we will not know why it seems a certain way to be in that state, or even why it seems like anything at all'. (p. 1)

As C&S also note, Chalmers (along with others) takes this conclusion to be supported by certain 'key intuitions' that supposedly emerge when we imagine various scenarios designed to present situations in which information about the structure and function of conscious experiences does not provide knowledge of *what it's like* to have those experiences. These include Chalmers's 'zombies', or molecular duplicates described as having no conscious experiences, Frank Jackson's neuroscientist Mary, brought up in a black-and-white room, who is described as knowing all the structural and functional facts about human color experience, but not what it is like to see red, and Thomas Nagel's chiroptologist who is described as knowing all about the brain and central nervous system of bats, but not what it's like to be one.

C&S argue, however, that this argument moves too quickly, since any supportive 'key intuitions' that emerge from considering such scenarios are tainted by theory. Only those who already doubt that there can be a physicalistic explanation of conscious experience—that is, only those who already believe that the 'hard problem' of consciousness is insoluble—will have these intuitions, or find the anti-physicalist's characterization of what is going on in these scenarios compelling. And thus, they argue, premises supported by these intuitions cannot legitimately be used in any argument that concludes that the structure and function of conscious mental states cannot explain what it is like to be in them (or, for that matter, in any argument against any particular physicalistic theory of conscious mental states).

Just to make things clear, I'll try to state the argument C&S attribute to Chalmers, et al in a way that seems to capture their worries:

(P) It is possible to have knowledge of all the structural and functional properties of a conscious experience of type E, but not have knowledge of its phenomenal character, or 'feel'. (Or alternatively, as C&S sometimes put it, it is (metaphysically) possible for there to be a state with exactly the composition, structure, and function of a conscious experience, but which has no phenomenal character, or feel).

(C) Therefore, a conscious experience's phenomenal character, or 'feel', cannot be fully explained by any of its structural, compositional, or functional properties.

And the 'key intuitions'—about zombies, Mary, bats, etc.—can be regarded as intuitions that support Premise (P). Now sometimes C&S suggest that claims such as 'zombies are *metaphysically possible'* are themselves among the 'key intuitions', rather than premises

supported by the more specific intuitions designed to be evoked by the well-known thought experiments (e.g. that, following Chalmers (1996, pp. 94-5), there could be a molecular duplicate of me who fails to experience green when seeing the trees outside the window, or pleasant taste sensations while eating chocolate, or pain when injured—even though *I,* in the identical physical states*,* am having all those sensations. I think it is more *intuitively* plausible to regard the latter sorts of claims as arising from intuition, since it is hard to see how claims about *metaphysical possibility* are either intuitively attractive or unattractive. But there are other reasons for holding this view, which I'll discuss later in these comments.

One may wonder, in any case, whether is it plausible to think that only 'antecedent dualists' have the supportive intuitions in question; for example, that there could be a zombie, that Mary, despite her comprehensive knowledge of the physical and functional facts about human color vision, doesn't know what it's like to see red, or that we cannot know, even in principle, what it's like to be a bat. C&S have two arguments. First (p. 4), they cite some statistics that suggest that not everyone reacts as Chalmers expects to the zombie scenario. According to a (2010) survey they cite by Chalmers and Bourget, 'only around 23% of philosophers are inclined to find zombies metaphysically possible, and as many as 19% report that they find zombies inconceivable'.

Now it's hard to know how to interpret these statistics, since it's hard to know what it means to be 'inclined to find zombies metaphysically possible'. One can find zombies *conceivable*—that is, one can admit to being able to *imagine or conceive* that there is a molecular duplicate of a normal human being that has no conscious experiences—but not take seriously any claim that

there *could be* such a creature. That is, one could contend that though *it may seem* that there could be such a creature, there is some good way of explaining why the fact that zombies *seem possible* does not entail that they are. This, it seems, would be the likely response of those who are skeptical about the conclusion of the argument above. Indeed, this way of interpreting the statistics makes sense of the finding that while 81% of the participants claim to find zombies *conceivable*, only 23% claim to 'find' them genuinely *possible*.

However, C&S argue further that it's not clear what it is to be able to *conceive* of a zombie. It's not merely, they argue, that the existence of zombies cannot be ruled out a priori, since this would render too many impossibilities conceivable. Rather, they suggest, the existence of zombies is conceivable only if we can 'represent them in a way that coheres with our knowledge of (at least) other a priori truths'—and that this renders zombies inconceivable. But does it? It seems not, unless at least some physicalist or functionalist characterizations of conscious experiences are a priori, but despite the efforts of various analytic functionalists (e.g. Dennett, see p. 7) to hold onto this thesis, it is no longer generally regarded as plausible.

On the other hand, C&S suggest later that a zombie is conceivable if we can mentally represent it 'in a manner that is coherent with how we know the world to be', and this suggests that any such representation must cohere with known *a posteriori* truths as well. But here too it's hard to see how this would render zombies inconceivable. Even if we were to have comprehensive knowledge of the body, brain, and environment of my molecular duplicate, it's hard to see why the claim that it has no conscious experiences would not cohere with this information. To be sure, if we were to *know* that the phenomenal character of conscious experiences can be fully

explained by the structure and function of those states, then the possibility of zombies would not cohere with 'how we know the world to be'. But it seems that both physicalists and dualists can agree that we have no such knowledge.

C&S give analogous arguments to show that intuitions about Jackson's neuroscientist Mary and Nagel's bat are similarly tainted by prior theoretical concerns, and I have analogous concerns about them, but I'll restrict my comments to the zombie cases here.

In any case, even if some philosophers deny that they find zombies conceivable, it seems that physicalists should aim to do more than preach to the choir and avoid those who have fallen away from the church; they should aim to reach agnostics as well (and also have something to say to avowed physicalists—myself included—who nonetheless find zombies conceivable). C&S (p. 5) are willing to 'grant…Chalmers the claim that metaphysical possibility follows from conceivability'. But this, in my view, is the wrong strategy. The better strategy, I think, is to try to show that even if zombies are conceivable, they may not be metaphysically possible—either by arguing that there is no general evidential link between conceivability and possibility, or (preferably, in my view) arguing that although conceivability is *in general* good evidence for possibility (which allows, after all, for a robust modal epistemology), this does not hold for cases involving the conceivability of physical states without phenomenal character, or vice versa.

Indeed, I'm not sure that this suggestion, in the end, diverges very much from C&S's own view. They state, many times, that when we consider the classic anti-physicalist thought experiments of Chalmers, Jackson, and Nagel, we should ask ourselves *what the world must be like for the*

'key intuition' to be true. But if we think of the 'key intuition' as merely the claim that zombies etc. are *conceivable* (or *seem* possible), all that follows from the truth of that intuition is that zombies are indeed conceivable (or seem possible). It takes more to establish that zombies would therefore *be* possible—and this is the only claim that physicalists need to deny. But if the only evidence for the (metaphysical) possibility of zombies is that they are conceivable, and we can deny that their conceivability provides evidence for their possibility, then we can dispute the conclusions of the arguments involving zombies, Mary, and the bat without denying any conceivability claims.

We can also dispute the conclusion of the argument presented above, namely, (C) A conscious experience's phenomenal character, or 'feel', cannot be fully explained by any of its structural, compositional, or functional properties—again without having to deny that zombies, etc. are conceivable. Or, to put it another way, we can agree that there is indeed a hard *problem* of consciousness, in the sense that it may seem particularly difficult to explain 'how and why physical processes give rise to [conscious] experience'—but contend that this hard problem can be *solved*.

It takes argument, of course, to show that conceivability does not (either generally, or in certain special cases) entail, or provide evidence for, possibility, and this argument, of course, will be, and has been, challenged. But a number of philosophers have made strides in producing such an argument—and this should be reassuring to those of us who, uh, occupy that corner of logical space in which, despite being physicalists,'we are the 81%'!