

The Paradox of Phenomenal Judgment and Causality

CHRIS NAEGLE

This paper will attempt to demonstrate that any property dualism which accepts the modal argument must hold that phenomenal consciousness has no causal impact on the physical. Additionally, it will attempt to show that this epiphenomenalism makes phenomenal judgment unreliable. Since one of the primary justifications for property dualism is the experience and report of qualia, this presents a great difficulty for any non-interactionist dualist account. Other reasons for rejecting epiphenomenalism will be considered, since they also work against the property dualist. The modal argument and an acquaintance based non-causal epistemology of phenomenal judgment will come from David Chalmers, specifically outlined in his book *The Conscious Mind*. I conclude by arguing that the most plausible options left are eliminativism and interactionist dualism.

I. Definitions

For the remainder of the paper, the behavioral, chemical, and functional properties of a person will be referred to collectively as material properties. The logically separate mental properties of property dualism will be referred to as phenomenal properties; these properties somehow reside in matter while they cannot be deduced from any particular configuration of the standard properties of matter. Judgment refers to the maximally functional description of a phenomenal belief; this is meant to avoid some of the difficulties in discussing the intentional properties of

Chris Naegle graduated with an economics degree from Brigham Young University this April. His interests include philosophy of mind and philosophy of science. This paper tied for second in the 2012 David H. Yarn Philosophical Essay Contest.

belief. Hopefully these terms are suitably neutral so as to not constitute a tacit endorsement of any position, as they are intended as simply a quick way of distinguishing the two categories.

II. The Modal Argument and Epiphenomenalism

The modal argument against materialism demonstrates the conceptual and logical independence of material and phenomenal facts, blocking any attempt to identify one with the other. Chalmers' version begins with the fact that one can imagine a world in which zombies, persons which are physically identical but absent of any phenomenal experience, exist. If this world can be imagined, it is logically possible, and since identities necessarily extend through all possible worlds, the material cannot be identical to or logically derived from the phenomenal—some separate phenomenal property must exist. Related expansions and arguments by Chalmers and Kripke against the possibility of a posteriori identification of the physical with the phenomenal are also accepted for the purposes of this paper.

The consequences of this position can be seen with a now common intuition pump concerning zombie Chalmers (ZC), presented by Chalmers himself (192). ZC has given all of the same arguments and positions concerning qualia that the real Chalmers does, but lacks any phenomenal experience. He sits in his office and talks to students about the phenomenal feel of sunlight as it streams through the window, despite the fact that neither he nor his students have any phenomenal experience. It follows that in zombie world the phenomenal content (in this case, the lack thereof) of ZC has no relation to his judgments or statements concerning qualia, at least as far as this would constitute a material change—there is absolutely no causal connection involved in ZC's knowledge. ZC is just as adamant as Chalmers that his phenomenal experiences are real, and constitute a really hard problem. Additionally, ZC is just as confident that the only difference between a zombie world and ours concerns certain phenomenal properties. Therefore, judgments concerning phenomenal properties are conceivable without the existence of phenomenal properties (we'll return to this later).

After zombies have been thoroughly considered, it is easy to see why property dualists who accept the total logical independence of the material and the phenomenal are necessarily epiphenomenalists if they hold that it is logically possible that a material duplicate of myself could have all of the same physical properties as me, without my phenomenal properties. This depends on a minimal definition of causality. A property can be said to cause X if the absence of said property would entail the absence of X

in similar circumstances. This means that phenomenal properties are causal if some X would or would not have obtained if the property were absent. The conceivability of zombie worlds coupled with the failure of a posteriori identification of physical and phenomenal properties must entail epiphenomenalism under this definition of causality—if some causal relation necessarily spanned the gap between the phenomenal and the physical, there would be modal consequences in all possible worlds. Physical and phenomenal properties may happen to be related in particular worlds, but are not necessarily connected in any way.

Mills has argued that physical causes may be overdetermined by systems involving phenomenal properties, with the actions of agents being caused by both mental and physical systems. While these arguments could avoid a direct collapse into epiphenomenalism, this distinction is unimportant to the arguments below. There would be no way to distinguish a causally overdetermined world from an epiphenomenal world. In any case, this view suffers from its own modal problems, since one could imagine worlds in which the physical causal story and the mental story weren't perfectly synched; consideration of these cases shows that these arguments amount to an updated version of parallelism. In either case, the account boils down to epiphenomenalism.

Since I have shown that the modal argument strongly implies epiphenomenalism, there are a number of interesting conclusions one can make beyond this finding. Interactionist dualists should have a problem with the modal argument, because if the mind interacted with the material, zombies would be inconceivable or demonstrably untrue a posteriori. One hears little argument from interactionists on this point (perhaps because there are so few, or because they are simply happy to avoid the issue). That said, we can move on to assessing epiphenomenalism directly.

III. Phenomenal Judgment and Epiphenomenalism

Frank Jackson's knowledge argument provides an excellent starting point for considering phenomenal judgment. Mary is a hyper-capable neuroscientist who has complete physical knowledge and perfect reasoning abilities, but who lacks any direct experience of color. She is then exposed to a new phenomenal experience, such as seeing red for the first time. She seems to learn something new, so it is natural to conclude that phenomenal properties exist that are not identical with or reducible to physical properties.

What exactly happens when Mary realizes that she is having a new experience? Presumably she now has a judgment she did not have before;

namely, the judgment that she has had a new phenomenal experience. Using intuitive folk psychological explanation, one might say that because of this judgment, she might display the behavior of saying, "I now understand what it is like to see red, none of my books were able to convey this experience!" If the above is reasonable, it seems as though we have run into a contradiction. If Mary's physical behavior is changing because she acquired a phenomenal fact, how can it be that the phenomenal fact is not causal? If phenomenal judgment is completely causal, either Mary cannot gain any knowledge, or epiphenomenalism is false and phenomenal properties are causal.

The epiphenomenalist can reply that the frequency of red light and other physical content of the red experience could account for the change in behavior, while a non-causal account of knowledge could save the intuition that Mary gains some phenomenal fact. The functional explanation of the reporting behavior is possible, but difficult to maintain, as argued further below. As far as Mary's claims to knowledge, only a non-causal acquaintance theory can accommodate justification for any claims she might make.

Chalmers develops an acquaintance theory of phenomenal knowledge throughout his writings, which can deal with these situations. The acquaintance relation is, by its nature, impossible to fully explicate here, but goes something like this: being acquainted with X is a non-conceptual metaphysical epistemic relation that grounds more complex epistemic concepts such as judgments, beliefs, and concepts. If Mary has some acquaintance with her experience of red, this acquaintance may not be causal and still justify her knowledge of her red experience.

No direct attack on the acquaintance theory of knowledge will be attempted here, as all advocates of acquaintance theory hold that acquaintance is non-causal. My initial attempts to undermine acquaintance by working backwards from distinctions between the functional nature of syntax and the intentional nature of semantics proved fruitless, as acquaintance is a metaphysical, primordial relation. However, acquaintance theories have an ample stable of critics, and if any of their arguments succeed, Mary would find it extremely difficult to justify her new knowledge (see Fumerton and Sellars). Additionally, one would have to accept an internalist account of epistemology in order for acquaintance to be remotely convincing, so it remains to be seen whether this method of justification is a viable option for epiphenomenalists.

Even if we agree that acquaintance allows us to say that Mary has knowledge, the idea that the phenomenal experience and its justification is completely isolated from the physical states is highly problematic. If acquaintance allows for the fortuitous non-causal justification of our

functional behavior and beliefs, it raises the question of why the phenomenal and the mental should be connected so as to allow the formation of the functional requirements of phenomenal judgment. When one sees a red object, the phenomenal chain of events that occurs after the event must be properly related to the physical chain which follows.

If the phenomenal is logically independent from the physical, then any laws or relations between the phenomenal and the physical cannot be deduced from the physical. How, then, can the epiphenomenalist plausibly maintain that we exist in a world where psychophysical laws allow acquaintance to synch up with the physical states? After all, beliefs and judgments must have some syntax; there must be some physical constituent of belief for acquaintance to provide the grounds of justification. Furthermore, there would be no relation between the epiphenomenalists experience of the phenomenal and their verbal explanation of any possible nomological relation.

Chalmers has provided an account of phenomenal judgment in one of many worlds that could plausibly account for all of our functional and phenomenal experience. We have no epistemic grounds for supposing that there is any coincidence between the physical and the phenomenal, let alone enough to postulate that they connect in deep, pre-conceptual ways. Any argument which could attempt to identify an epiphenomenal world with the required psychophysical laws as the actual one would undermine epiphenomenalism because any experiential claim would give qualia causal efficacy, or deny the modal argument. In either case, epiphenomenalism is abandoned, undermined, or unjustifiably maintained.

IV. Other Objections to Epiphenomenalism

One traditional objection to epiphenomenalism is a restatement of the argument above: if there are barriers to giving an account of our own mental states if epiphenomenalism is true, then having knowledge of other minds is impossible since there is no logically necessary correlation between any physical state and any mental state. Epiphenomenalists need only to maintain that knowledge of other minds can be rationally maintained without appealing to the behaviors of other people to avoid this objection. One could reason that because humans are reasonably similar in most respects, they would be similar phenomenally. The basic form of these inferential arguments are analogous to arguments for the existence of other minds available to other positions, if behavior is logically independent of any phenomenal properties.

Several of the commonly cited objections to epiphenomenalism are exceptionally weak. The weakest is the argument from evolution, which attempts to claim that an epiphenomenal consciousness would not be evolutionarily adaptive, and so would be selected against. Jackson dispatches this argument rather quickly by giving an example of a bear's fur coat: the heaviness is a disadvantage, but the warmth is an advantage. If the neutral or negative characteristic is tied to a positive one, they will both be selected for if the positive characteristic has a greater magnitude.

A reply to this argument could easily cut deeper, however. The idea that evolution ruthlessly eliminates any weakness or irrelevancy in organism is extremely misguided. For instance, a mutation present in the common ancestor of both chimpanzees and humans had a mutation that switched off the production of vitamin C, which is essential for life and produced within all other mammals (Milton 54). Without constantly eating vitamin C, both chimpanzees and humans will die from scurvy, but evolution did not select against a weakness that was introduced without any benefit at all (as the gene does not appear to be correlated with any positive phenotype). So if there are purely negative mutations that persist over long periods of time within a population, there cannot be a defeater for any single trait of an organism using natural selection. One can never say that a trait would be logically impossible unless it resulted in the certain death of the individual bearing it. If the trait is non-causal, as an epiphenomenal consciousness would be, then natural selection would be completely indifferent to its arising in a population. Natural selection could only work on its physical correlates, and these are not currently known, so the evolutionary argument against epiphenomenalism is a complete failure.

In contrast to the irrelevancy of the objection above, the proposed connection between physical causes and phenomenal events seems to me to be as murky as any interactionist account. Epiphenomenalism supposes that some physical state *X* leads to some phenomenal state *Y* with some regularity, while any phenomenal state *Y* never leads to any physical state. How can one account for the first relation between matter and phenomenal stuff? If phenomenal properties reside amongst the intrinsic properties of a quark, as might have been Russell's view, how can the location of that quark in my brain have any relation to the external event of stubbing my toe, or the phenomenal experience of pain?

If intrinsic properties are not involved in the causal story of the quark, it isn't clear how the causal story of the quark's relation to my toe's pain signals could impact any intrinsic properties. If the phenomenal properties are relegated to a more abstract ontological location, one might risk sliding into substance dualism as the concepts grow in distance from the immediate intrinsic properties of known particles. In the middle, if

there are collections of particles engaged in epiphenomenal property causation, one must provide an account of emergence that would be mutually exclusive from an account which could support a weak materialist. Any epiphenomenal explanation must ground phenomenal properties in matter without appealing to notions which would collapse into materialism or substance dualism.

This objection is different from the inability to demonstrate the existence of any particular psychophysical laws, since it attacks a law generally accepted to exist. If interactionist psychophysical laws are denied on the basis that only matter can be causally efficacious, one still must explain why the causal interaction running from the material to the phenomenal doesn't suffer from the old mind-body problem.

The nearest epiphenomenal response would be that principles such as causal closure and the conservation of energy only prohibit causality from intruding into the physical scheme. There are no prohibitions within science or logic against the material causing properties that do not compete for energy or physical change. This is certainly true, but does little to banish concerns that phenomenal and physical properties could have any interaction given that they are so intrinsically distinct. This may seem like a small problem compared to the major difficulties found in any philosophy of mind, but it is one that materialists can more easily avoid.

V. Conclusion

If the arguments above succeed in casting more doubt on epiphenomenalism, there are only a few options left to us. Interactionist dualism retains the causal relationships between the physical and the phenomenal, but suffers from the mind-body problem and perhaps its own modal challenges. Eliminativism, the position that the zombie world is actual, has no causal problems but denies qualia, which may be unacceptable given our phenomenal experience.

Both the eliminativist and interactionist ask us to reject the modal argument in favor of counter-intuitive metaphysics of mind or matter. An increasing number of philosophers are willing to abandon their intuitive phenomenal judgments in favor of an elegant, if uncomfortable, Procrustean bed. Even fewer are willing to violate their nomological accounts of the physical to make room for mind as an exception to current physics (a thorough understanding of the indeterministic nature of quantum mechanics doesn't exactly throw the door open to meddling spirits).

Non-reductive physicalism is often offered as a compromise between the modal argument and physicalist intuitions, but Jaegwon Kim convincingly argues that this position collapses into either eliminativism or interactionist dualism (44–46). In order to keep mental causation in a physicalist account of mind, macro properties of mental systems cannot merely supervene on the physical; they must be identical to some physical process. If macro property *M* stands in a causal relation to micro property *P*, it can only do so because of their shared relation to some event *Z*. The absence of direct causation in this account subjects non-reductive materialism to some of the same arguments I have used against epiphenomenalism above.

None of these options seems particularly appetizing given the cost of each position. There seems to be a fundamental impossibility in affirming the three most natural commitments in philosophy of mind; we want to allow mental causation, a robust account of qualia, and physical closure all at once, but the modal argument forces us to abandon one. I've shown that denying mental causation removes our motivations for accepting a robust account of qualia, since we would lose reliable knowledge of our qualia. Amidst all of these epistemological and metaphysical concerns, there are no satisfying options. It seems that we are left with the least palatable of our choices: arguing for the existence of a soul that mysteriously interacts with matter, or the absence and illusion of the conscious mind.

Works Cited

- Chalmers, David. *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.
- . “The Content and Epistemology of Phenomenal Belief.” *Consciousness: New Philosophical Perspectives*. Ed. Quentin Smith and Aleksandar Jokic. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. 220–72.
- . “Phenomenal Concepts and the Explanatory Gap.” *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge*. Ed. Torin Alter and Sven Walter. New York: Oxford UP, 2007. 167–94.
- Fumerton, Richard. 1985. *Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems of Perception*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Jackson, F. “Epiphenomenal Qualia.” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 32:127 (1982): 127-136.
- Jaegwon Kim. 1989. “The Myth of Nonreductive Materialism.” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 63.3 (1989) 31-47. Dec 21, 2011.
- Mills, E. “Interaction and Overdetermination.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 33.1 (1996): 105–117. Dec 21, 2011.
- Milton, Katharine. “Micronutrient Intakes of Wild Primates: are Humans Different?” *Comparative Biochemistry and Physiology*. 136.1 (2003): 47-59. Dec 21, 2011.
- Sellars, Wilfrid. “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.” *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, 1.1 (1956): 253-329. Dec 21, 2011.

