HUMAN ZOMBIES ARE METAPHYSICALLY IMPOSSIBLE

ABSTRACT. Chalmers (The Conscious Mind, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996) has argued for a form of property dualism on the basis of the concept of a zombie (which is physically identical to normals), and the concept of the inverted spectrum. He asserts that these concepts show that the facts about consciousness, such as experience or qualia, are really further facts about our world, over and above the physical facts. He claims that they are the hard part of the mind-body issue. He also claims that consciousness is a fundamental feature of the world like mass, charge, etc.

He says that consciousness does not logically supervene on the physical and all current attempts to assert an identity between consciousness and the physical are just as non-reductive as his dualism. They are simply correlations and are part of the problem of the explanatory gap. In this paper, three examples of strong identities between a sensation or a quale and a physiological process are presented, which overcome these problems. They explain the identity in an a priori manner and they show that consciousness or sensations (Q) logically supervene on the physical (P), in that it is logically impossible to have P and not to have Q. In each case, the sensation was predicted and entailed by the physical. The inverted spectrum problem for consciousness is overcome and explained by a striking asymmetry in colour space. It is concluded that as some physical properties realize some sensations or qualia that human zombies are not metaphysically possible and the explanatory gap is bridged in these cases. Thus, the hard problem is overcome in these instances.

The concept of a zombie has been used to refute materialism and to support a new form of dualism (Chalmers 1996). Chalmers has proposed the following basic argument:

(1) In our world, there are conscious experiences.
(2) There is a logically possible world physically identical to ours, in which the positive facts about consciousness in our world do not hold.
(3) Therefore, facts about consciousness are further facts about our world, over and above the physical facts.
(4) So materialism is false (Chalmers 1996, 123).
He then says: “if a physically identical zombie world is logically possible, it follows that the presence of consciousness is an extra fact about our world, not guaranteed by the physical facts alone. The character of our world is not exhausted by the character supplied by the physical facts, there is extra character due to the presence of consciousness” (p. 123).

To support this claim, Chalmers argues that consciousness does not supervene logically on the physical, and therefore cannot be reductively explained. He then argues that conscious experience is almost unique in its failure to supervene logically. I want to be quite clear on what Chalmers means by logical supervenience. Chalmers asserts that “B-properties are logically supervenient on A-properties if for any logically possible situation Y that is A-indiscernible from the actual situation X, then all the B-facts true are true of Y. Or more simply, B-properties are logically supervenient on A-properties if for any actual situation X, the A-facts about X entail the B-facts about X (where “entails Q” is understood as “It is logically impossible that P and not Q”). – Finally, if B-properties are logically supervenient on A-properties according to primary intensions, then the implication from A-facts to B-facts will be a priori”. (p. 70). I would like to highlight his stress on the implication about being a priori as this will be important later.

Chalmers claims that the important point about consciousness is that “a mental state is conscious if it has a qualitative feel – an associated quality of experience. These qualitative feels are also known as phenomenal qualities, qualia for short. The problem of explaining these phenomenal qualities is just the problem of explaining consciousness. This is the really hard part of the mind-body problem”. (p. 4).

Why does Chalmers assert that qualia do not supervene on the physical facts? He bases this claim largely on Levine’s concept of the explanatory gap. (Levine 1983). Levine states that no matter how much we know about the neurophysiology of the mind, we can’t explain why something has the colour red and not green or why excitation of C-fibres produces a particular painful quale. There is nothing in the physical story that says why an experience is of one particular variety rather than another. All the cases are correlations, thus the physical story does not entail the sensation. Levine claims that thus there is an explanatory gap in a physicalist account of experience and there have been no instance of a physical account bridging the gap. Chalmers concurs that the fact that consciousness