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If mental states are causally inert do we have any reason to believe they exist?

Human consciousness and the very existence and concept of the mind or soul seem to pose the metaphysical touchstone for philosophers and physicist alike. Epiphenomenalism claims that mental states are caused by physical states but are themselves causally inert. Thus, by virtue of the epiphenomenal nature of mental states the very existence of mental states can be questioned (by a materialistic stance). If they don't exert any causal influence, then they'll likely resist any physicalist explanation. And if mental states are causally inert do we have any reason to believe they exist? This essay aims to answer the question how we can believe that mental states (qualia and propositional attitudes) exist by first analysing the nature of mental states, secondly by challenging physicalist epiphenomenalism and finally by stating that the epistemic ability to capture reality is one aspect but the ontological possibility of a priori knowledge and a posteriori knowledge by qualia is another.

According to John Searle's definition „consciousness consists of inner, qualitative, subjective states and processes of sentience or awareness”¹. Even though its essential features are qualitativity, unity and subjectivity and thus a subjective ontology, it could still be the subject

¹ John R. Searle: “Consciousness”, in: *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, Vol. 23, March 2000, p. 3; under: <https://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~paller/dialogue/csc1.pdf>; last access: 09.03.2021.

of epistemically objective science in Searle's way of thinking. For him there is no doubt that it functions causally. Thus, Searle's view may be seen as violating the causal closure principle² formulating that all physical effects have physical causes.³ For Searle however these problems do not arise because „irreducible consciousness is not something over and above its neural base“⁴.

There are two categories of mental states: experiential state (qualia) and propositional attitudes (attitude of belief or intention). Qualia are mental states that constitute our phenomenal consciousness.⁵ Due to their intrinsic and irreducible nature, they are only experienced through

² Discussed by Jaegwon Kim for example in: *The Philosophy of Mind*. pp. 55-56 and “The Many Problems of Mental Causation” in: *Philosophy of Mind*. pp.170-179.

³ Whereas the mind resides in the brain (physical), the mental states themselves are mental and according to epiphenomenalists not even causally efficacious.

⁴ In Chalmers terms this is „the easy problem of consciousness“, in: David J. Chalmers: “Consciousness and Its Place in Nature”, in: *Philosophy of Mind*. p. 247. John R. Searle: “Why I am not a property dualist”, in: *Philosophy in a New Century*. p. 4; under: <https://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~paller/dialogue/propertydualism.pdf>; last access: 09.03.2021.

⁵ Ned Block: “Concepts of Consciousness”, in: *Philosophy of Mind*. p. 206. However, there are propositional states (evaluative beliefs) that could also have a certain, affective, phenomenology.

introspection and are therefore private. By that they elude any form of physical explanation in an objective perspective.⁶

This is the kind of phenomenal experience and knowledge that Frank Jackson⁷ shows in his thought experiment about the brilliant scientist Mary who has never seen colours herself, but knows all there is to know about colours physically. But did Mary really know all there is? She obviously didn't know what it was like to actually see colours. She has never seen the blue of the sky or the green of the grass under her feet. Her eyes catch the intensity of the colours and in her retina and brain a certain picture of the colourful world around her finally evolves. Thus, Thomas Nagel's "what it is like argument" is a real challenge to physicalism.⁸

Underlying Jackson's thought experiment is the assumption that not all the facts about the world are physical facts (Mary's "beforehand knowledge" learned through descriptions in a textbook) but there are also non-physical facts such as colour-qualia (Mary's "knowledge in retrospect" learned through experiencing sense perception). In addition to this "knowledge argument", Jackson also introduces "the modal argument" against physicalism which appeals to the logical possibility of organisms being physically like us but lacking any conscious mental life.⁹ He claims that there must be more to humans than just physiology. These objections rebut the physicalists stance but not the very existence of mental states per se, even if it fails to capture

⁶ Chalmers calls this „the hard problem of consciousness“. David J. Chalmers: "Consciousness and Its Place in Nature", in: *Philosophy of Mind*. p. 247.

⁷ Frank Jackson: "Epiphenomenal Qualia", in: *Philosophy of Mind*. p. 275.

⁸ Thomas Nagel: "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", in: *Philosophy of Mind*. pp. 219-226.

⁹ See Chalmers' philosophical zombies (David J. Chalmers: *The Conscious Mind*).

internal experiential states in an objective way. As humans we experience them every day and if “to exist” means “to be myself” (in the sense of οὐσία), then I think I couldn’t exist as a human being without thinking as my thoughts make who I am, what I believe, how I perceive the world and how I act. In my opinion, mind and body are distinct but also correlated. The brain is the physical place where the mind is located to process thoughts for example. But they are not the same. If they would be the same, then mental and physical states wouldn’t be distinct such as a finger being sliced open by a knife (physical and neuronal via C-fiber activation according to Jaegwon Kim) and the pain (mental).

So far, our epistemic ability to capture reality wasn’t able to prove without any doubt if mental states are causally inert but we have to acknowledge that this is only one aspect but the ontological possibility of a priori knowledge and a posteriori knowledge by qualia is another. Alfred North Whitehead’s *Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness* warns against trying to put the abstract (the human mind) into a concrete theoretical outfit which stipulates its inner workings.

„There is an error; but it is merely the accidental error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete. It is an example of what I will call the ‘Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness’. This fallacy is the occasion of great confusion in philosophy.”¹⁰

Whitehead holds that we tend to falsely put direct experience in the abstract and thereby confusion can follow by mistaking an abstract concept or belief about the human mind for a concrete reality. For me, the same could happen in regard to the body-mind problem. We try to grasp the nature of

¹⁰ Alfred North Whitehead: *Science and the modern World*. Lowell Lectures, III, p. 64.

our mind with scientific methods that capture the extrinsic features but what about the intrinsic, qualitative and subjective ones? What if the content of our consciousness is not a neat object to be examined and described in a clear linguistic way, but prone to error, change and confusion?

Phenomenal states such as love are individual so that it seems hardly likely to come up with one valid “law” for predicting love. Love may be understood by biological explications such as pheromones and oxytocin but these hardly encompass the phenomenon of love. People fall in love with people they wouldn’t even have guessed they would. Non-smokers who detest smoking fall in love with smokers. Thus, even if we could stipulate laws, human behaviours and human minds are not only a result of genetic factors, biological proceedings and neuroscientific laws but also of individual life experiences and unpredictable emotions. We, as human beings are more than being subjected to nomological laws as one of the main features of humans is reason and not being a causal working machine. Science has its limits when it comes to humans and the factor of individuality and inaccuracy of any possible experiment and the qualitiveness and subjectivity of mental states must be taken into account which makes it hard to formulate any hypothesis concerning mental states in humans. So far, no experiment has proven without any doubt that mental states don’t exist, just that they are hard to subject under any scientific theory in a physicalist way.

In nuce, do we have any reasons to believe that mental states exist? Due to the nature of mental states every individual does experience them every day, be it when forming a belief, falling in love, smelling the rain or doing an introspection of our inner attitudes and qualia. In Descartes’ line of thinking the οὐσία of qualia is transparent for the subject as the human cannot suffer pain without feeling any pain. While the dualist might simply accept that there is no explanation of

qualia as they are not physical, the physicalist might maintain that there is an explanation that we just cannot fathom yet.

Just because we don't know enough about the causal status of consciousness doesn't mean that the elusive and abstract nature of mental states allows for eliminativism of any sort. The human mind may just be one of the most challenging and astonishing entities philosophers and scientists may ever find.

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