

The Mental Measurement Problem: The Frictionless Epistemology of Conceptual Dualism

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0 · Background

Two ways of *thinking* about mental states as ‘conscious’:

- In a how-it-feels sense, as **phenomenally (p-) conscious**: as experienty, as having a certain ineffable qualitative character.
- In a how-it-works, functional sense, as **access (a-) conscious**: as available for arbitrary use within our cognitive economy, as uniquely well positioned to directly influence one’s thoughts and behaviors.

Conceptual dualists: p-consciousness and a-consciousness are conceptually distinct. You can’t discover functional facts about access by reflecting on facts about experience, and vice versa.

Note: This view about *concepts* is compatible with both metaphysical dualism and physicalism.

My View: p-consciousness is a functional concept: that a state is p-conscious a priori entails that it is a-conscious. Conceiving of a phenomenal mind is to conceive of an underlying functional structure in which various experiences are embedded/integrated and through which they bear relations to one another.

Note for philosophers: I’m following Chalmers in distinguishing the *analytical* from the *conceptual/a priori*.

The goal of this talk: demonstrate unattractive epistemological consequences of conceptual dualism.

1 · The Mental Measurement Problem, Laid Out

STARTING POINT

Scenario: Some scientists are considering the hypothesis that you have bat-sonar experiences.

Questions: How would we test this hypothesis (or any similar hypothesis)? In general, what sort of scientific evidence can support judgments about what subjects do/don’t experience?

OVERLAP QUESTIONS AND EMPIRICAL METHOD

Under conceptual dualism, because there are no conceptual constraints, the pattern of overlap for p-consciousness and a-consciousness will be discoverable only through empirical investigation. Empirical investigations into such overlap questions have the following logical form:

Question: What is the overlap of *F* and *G*?

Procedure: Observe a bunch of instances of *F* and *G* under various conditions (to collect a representative sample) and then inductively infer overall F/G overlap from the patterns we pick up.

A MEASUREMENT PROBLEM

Scenario: We use a G-meter that’s designed to track G-ness by way of tracking F-ness.

Problem: Can’t help with the F/G overlap question, since we’d be able to predict in advance precisely what sort of F/G overlap we’d observe (i.e. a perfect overlap). We’d have ‘screened off’ any non-F Gs!

The p-consciousness/a-consciousness overlap question seems plagued by just such a measurement problem. While we can reliably collect data on a-consciousness using standard ‘objective’, third-personal, scientific methods, it’s unclear whether any such method could serve as a measure for p-consciousness.

The Mental Measurement Problem: If we cannot directly measure p-consciousness, how could we ever justify an answer to the p-consciousness/a-consciousness overlap question?

Note: Importantly, we’ve assumed conceptual dualism in framing this problem.

REAL-WORLD PROBLEM CASES

Visuo-spatial extinction: subjects can identify objects presented, without competition, to one eye, but fail to identify objects presented to left eye when different object is simultaneously presented to right eye. Importantly, when a face is presented to their left eye, the fusiform face area still lights up. Either:

1. The subject has a face-experience but is unable to cognitively access experience and report on it.
2. The subject has no face-experience in the first place.

Other Examples: blindsight, split brains, attentional neglect, memory bottlenecks (Sperling 1960)

“It does not seem that we could find any evidence that would decide one way or the other, because any evidence would inevitably derive from the reportability[/accessibility] of a phenomenally conscious state, and so it could not tell us about the phenomenal consciousness of a state which cannot be reported[/accessed].” — Block, p. 483, “Consciousness, Accessibility, and the Mesh...”

2 · The Inner Observation Strategy

It may seem ‘obvious’ to appeal to first-personal data to overcome conceptual dualist’s problem:

“Conscious experience is not directly observable in an experimental context, so we cannot generate data about the relationship between physical processes and experience at will. Nevertheless, we all have access to a rich source of data in our own case.” — Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem...”

This sort of strategy has a two-step structure:

1. Observe p-consciousness/a-consciousness overlap in our own case.
2. Take this p-consciousness/a-consciousness overlap data as an interpretive guide for situations in which we’re limited to third-personal data about a-consciousness.

Standard criticism: step 2 is founded on the unearned assumption that one’s own mind is similar to other minds in the ways that are in question.

My criticism: How does one ever establish step 1, the overall pattern of overlap in one’s own case?

THE WIDE NATURE OF THE MENTAL MEASUREMENT PROBLEM

Everyday cases have the same problematic structure as ‘problem’ cases. Examples:

Problem for *negative* experience judgments:

- Everyone reports not having access to bat-sonar experiences.
- But we can’t take lack of access as evidence for lack of experience.
- So we can’t justify claims that any particular person doesn’t have bat-sonar experience.

Problem for *positive* experience judgments:

- Most everyone reports having access to visual experiences.
- But we can’t take evidence of access as evidence for of experience.
- So we can’t justify claims that any particular person has visual experience.

The same problem also shows up in the first-personal context: If I can’t rule out inaccessible experiences, how do I know that I’m not having bat-sonar experience right now, at this very moment?!

Acquaintance objection: Perception/observation may require a two-step process where we need to ‘interpret’ data from the senses. But we’re *directly* acquainted with our own mental states!

Reply: If ‘acquaintance’ is just a synonym for ‘access’, this just makes conceptual dualism false. If not, the basic challenge remains the same: What is the pattern of overlap for acquaintance and a-consciousness?

3 · Background Assumption Strategy

The Main Idea: The mental measurement problem can be seen as an instance of a more general worry about the ultimate groundlessness of scientific methodology. But such worries aren’t often taken seriously: once we recognize that empirical investigation, essentially, requires *some* set of background assumptions or other, the idea that such background assumptions stand in need of prior justification can start to look silly.

Ex: We don’t insist on ruling out the Matrix-like scenarios before making scientific progress.

Reply: Standardly, empirical assumptions are revisable: we can imagine what observations would undermine them. But assumptions about p-/a-consciousness are immune to revision, and that’s fishy! [In Bayesian terms: $P(E|H) = P(E|\sim H)$]

Case 1: You assume perfect p-/a-consciousness overlap, but they in fact come apart. Yet the instances that disprove your assumption are, in principle, unobservable.

Case 2: You assume that p-/a-consciousness come apart, but they in fact overlap perfectly. Yet you’d never observe that the non-overlap cases don’t exist, so you could never overturn the bad assumption.

. . .

The High Costs of Conceptual Dualism: If conceptual dualism were right, it’d be impossible to ever gain epistemic traction on the p-conscious/a-consciousness overlap question. The very idea of getting an observational grip on p-consciousness would be incoherent, since all observation must go via a-consciousness. As a consequence, conceptual dualists must withdraw *all* judgments about experience (e.g. “I do not have bat-sonar experiences”, “Humans have visual experiences”).

A Better Option: If my view (p-conscious states must be a-conscious) were right, that would: a) explain why brains are candidate experience-havers while jars of mayonnaise are not, b) tell us that the p-consciousness/a-consciousness overlap question is a conceptual (rather than empirical) issue.