



DIALOGUES

Two Concepts of the Mental: A Comment on Korf's Reply

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I am grateful to Jakob Korf for his reply to my comment on his "Qualia in a Contemporary Neurobiological Perspective". I appreciate that Korf's intention is to approach the issue from the perspective of neuroscience, rather than philosophy of mind, and I suspect that our dialogue may have partly been at cross purposes. Korf concedes that he does not resolve the "hard problem" of Chalmers (1996). This is a reasonable concession and entirely appropriate for his aim. However, to mitigate the potential for miscommunication, some care is needed to ensure conceptual clarity, so that theoretical claims about brain processes are not erroneously exalted to metaphysical claims about the "hard problem".

The problem is that some mental terms are ambiguously used to pick out either phenomenal or functional properties. As noted by Chalmers, these are often conflated. For example, discussions of the mental often begin by "investing the problem with all the gravity of the problem of phenomenal consciousness", but then proceed to discuss some functional aspect of the mind, such as introspective perception (Chalmers, 1996, p.26). Such equivocation can be found in Korf's article and reply. Consider, for example, these two passages:

"Despite their biological determinacy, the associated feelings (the qualia) are and remain private." (Korf, 2015, p.43).

"Are these cognitive processes emerged from brain processes? Of course [...]! If such processes are associated with subjective feelings, i.e. they are qualia [...]" (Korf, 2016, p.69).

In the first passage, "qualia" is taken to refer to subjective feelings, which is the normal meaning of the term in philosophy. However, in the second passage, Korf appears to suggest that "qualia" picks out the "processes [...] associated with subjective feelings", rather than the subjective feelings themselves. Hence, the discussion slips between talking about phenomenal properties and talking about functional properties correlated with phenomenal properties.

This may seem like a pedantic point, but it is worth noting for the sake of facilitating interdisciplinary dialogue. Broadly speaking, neuroscience is concerned with the empirical discovery of processes involved in the production of behaviour, that is, the functional aspect of the mind. By contrast, philosophy is concerned with, among other things, the problem of how the phenomenal and functional components are related. The seriousness of this problem is highlighted by the fact that many philosophers believe reductive explanation fails. As I mention in my original comment, Chalmers argues that the two components are mutually irreducible and that physicalism is false. It has also recently been argued that we have reason to believe that panpsychism is false, because it fails to indicate what could possibly unify experiential and non-experiential components so that they could be considered aspects of a single mode of reality (Dainton, 2011, p.255). Dainton considers the metaphor of reality being like a vector consisting of two independent components, but the profound duality presupposed by this seems to

suggest that such reality refers to a conjunction of two ontologically basic elements, not a unitary phenomenon that explains these two components, and so even this position seems to fundamentally collapse into dualism.

The worry is that the conflation of phenomenal and functional concepts in neuroscientific discourse can obscure the above seriousness of the philosophical problem and give the misleading impression that more is being explained than actually is. This might leave philosophers complaining that the “hard problem” has actually been unaddressed, while neuroscientists might feel that such metaphysical objections detract from the empirical and theoretical merits of their research. Given the different interests of neuroscientists and philosophers, and the ambiguities of language, there is need for transparency regarding our definitions and care regarding our uses of mental terms.

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