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Nature of phenomenal consciousness: Problem and Prospects

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Abstract:

Consciousness is one of the most interesting, perhaps the most mysterious concept in philosophical discourse. When we say something about an object, we also think that we are doing this job consciously. When we think, perceive and act then a sort of information processing takes place with an internal aspect. This internal aspect is characterized as the subjective quality of experience. The subjective quality or phenomenal character of experience is also called subjectivity or qualia or phenomenal nature of consciousness. In this article we shall try to highlight about the subjective quality or phenomenal nature of consciousness. Also we will discuss some objection and their replies and want to so that these objections are not plausible against phenomenal consciousness.

Key Words: Explanatory Gap, Phenomenal consciousness, Qualia, Subjectivity, Zombies.

Main Article: The meaning of consciousness, according to dictionary is “the having of perception, thoughts, and feeling, awareness”.¹ But this definition is unable to explain all the aspects of consciousness. Rather a big part remains untouched. To have the proper concept and meaning of consciousness, we have to inculcate the ideas presented by some thinkers regarding this matter.

To explain consciousness, philosopher David Chalmers distinguishes between two concepts of mind ---phenomenal and psychological. The phenomenal concept of mind is that which is associated with a consciously experienced mental state. On the other hand, the psychological concept of mind is that which forms the causal or explanatory basis for behavior. In Chalmers words, “on the phenomenal concept, mind is characterized by the way it feels; on the psychological concept mind is characterized by what it does”.² Whatever way the philosophers, psychologists and neuroscientists want to define consciousness, the essence of consciousness remains ‘feeling a certain way; which is a qualitative subjective experience or subjectivity. We see that phenomenal consciousness has an essential feature which is called subjectivity. What is subjectivity? In general, subjectivity is a part of the explanandum that needs closer investigation for study of consciousness. According to Shoemaker, -“it is essential for a philosophical understanding of the mental that we appreciate that there is a first person perspective on it, a distinctive way mental states

present themselves to the subjects whose states they are, and that an essential part of the philosophical task is to give an account of mind which makes intelligible the perspective mental subjects have on their own mental lives.”³ When we want to discuss about the subjectivity of consciousness, we should trace the structures and features of experiential life. The subjectivity of experience directed a range of conscious mental states that also possess subjectively accessible qualitative features. Thomas Nagel opines that subjectivity can be explained as ‘what it is like’ to perceive a block triangle is subjectively distinct from what it is like to perceive a red circle.⁴ In his article ‘what is it like to be a bat?’ – maintaining the ‘bats’ example, he wants to demonstrate that our subjective and objective experiences are quite different. The objective experiences are related to the processing of information in the brain. By contrast, subjective experiences are entirely our own feeling. It cannot be ‘shared’ with others. The qualitative character of our experience is never comes to us simply as an object. It is appearing us in a certain way, like judged, seen, feared, remembered, smelled etc. It is one kind of sense of ownership. When I think about Tajmahal, white stones, orange tower, listen a Rabindra sangeet – all these various experiences seem to share a certain feature: they are all felt as mine. All these experiences have a common feature. They all involve in first person perspective. W.G.Lycan, in his book “Consciousness and Experience”, explains that subjectivity involves a presentation from a point of view. We can account for this ‘point-of-view’ aspect of representation by the possibility that such aspect can be represented by someone else in a third-person, scientific way.

However all humans have some mental states. Some of them are conscious. Conscious states such as pain states, visual experience and so on are such that it is ‘like’ something for the subject of the state to be in them. In other words, when there is something it is like to be in a mental state, that mental state has a phenomenal aspect or phenomenal character. For example, pain has a distinctive phenomenal aspect or character – it is painful. We can say phenomenal consciousness is a kind of experience. Phenomenal conscious properties are experiential properties. The totality of the experiential properties of a state are ‘what it is like’ to have it. Our all experiences of seeing, hearing, and smelling and pains – are all phenomenal conscious state. All experiential properties like sensations, feeling and perceptions are phenomenal conscious properties.

An important feature of phenomenal consciousness is nothing but the difference of intentional content. Again phenomenal conscious differences often make an intentional difference. However, famous neuro-physiological theorists like Francis Crick and Christof Koch⁵ offer a definition: “a synchronized 35-75 hertz neural oscillation in the sensory areas of the cortex is at the heart of phenomenal consciousness.” Our physical or functional nature does not help us to understand how to explain our subjective experiences. This is the central issue of the mind-body problem. The question is how does our neural activity give rise to a state of consciousness? This is known as explanatory gap⁶. Consciousness, considered in this sense, is phenomenal consciousness. Using synonyms, it can be described as ‘subjective experience’ and also as ‘what it is like to be us’. In a conversation with

Susan Blackmore on consciousness, Ned Block opines that phenomenal consciousness is something “that we find so hard to understand how it could be a brain state, on how it could be supervened or determined by a brain state. Phenomenal consciousness is a thing such that we don’t understand why it’s determined by one brain state rather than another”.⁷

Generally we say that, phenomenal consciousness is experience. What makes a state phenomenally conscious is that there is something ‘it is like’. Consider the case of afterimages of Tajmahal. Tajmahal is built up by various colourful marbel. A teacher instructs his students to stare at the oddly constructed Tajmahal for 20 seconds in good light. Then he also instructs his students to look at an ordinary constructed house or a white palace. The actual result is that one will see Tajmahal in its correct colors. The principle behind the novelty item is that afterimages brought about by brightly colored things will have the complementary colors of the objects that cause them. This principle can easily be verified by staring at some brightly colored things in strong light, then looking at a white surface. Red or green will each produce the other, as will blue or yellow. This little experiment will also demonstrate that the distance of the after image will be the same as the distance of the surface upon which one’s eyes are focused.

One possible answer is that the differences among the neural events are the cause of our afterimages. These neuroscientific explanations of how afterimages are produced, will never give any reason to use color words. So it will not give a complete answer to our question of how colors come into the afterimages that neural activation brings about. In a word, the neural process like wavelength composition of sunlight, lens, retina, chemical changes, muscle contractions etc. move –it is observable. Nowhere in this list do we find red or green or blue or any others color. But we see green or black or any other color in the Tajmahal. All such kind of qualities we have mentioned such as colors, taste, smells, degrees of pressure etc. are phenomenal qualities. So our basic question is “how do phenomenal qualities come into a full accounting of what happens when a person is having a perceptual experience or sensations?”

II

These basic questions are addressed by following theories: – Qualitative Event Realism, Dualism, Representationalism, Higher-Order Theories, Functionalism and Epiphenomenalism etc. Now I am going to offer a short description of these theories.

Qualitative Event Realism: Physical phenomena, according to realism, exist independently without depending on mental phenomena. The independent existence of physical phenomena is the main theme of realism. An initial feature for realism about experiences can be explained in this way. Suppose that a person sees a red apple. An apples looking red, it involve apples as an object, red colors etc. So looking red apples, ones need a distinctive kind of conscious event – a red experience that is something in its own right. Such experiences may cause by neural events. But it is not identical or reducible from any other material events such as neural events. Experienced are formed by phenomenal qualities. According to Robinson, the main tenant of realism is as follows –“something is happening

in after image cases, and that something is very similar to part of what goes on in seeing. ‘experiences’, and ways in which things look, are more or less –well-established ways of talking about this kind of something”.⁸

According to qualitative event realism (QER), experiences literally are formed by phenomenal qualities. To understand the view that experiences are phenomenal qualities, we can consider the case of bodily sensation. In bodily sensation, a pain is an experience of one kind. An itch is an experience of a different kind. When one asks what kinds of experiences we get, we say that one is a pain and the other is an itch. There are some differences between bodily sensations and experiences associated with the external sense. QER claims that pains are experiences. The quality of being painful is what makes a pain ‘a pain’. William S. Robinson opines that QER is best theory of phenomenal consciousness.⁹

Dualism: Dualistic theories of consciousness fall within two groups namely substance dualism and property dualism. Substance dualism asserts the independent existence of physical and non-physical entities. Property dualism, on the other hand, explains the physical properties and consciousness as two separate properties instantiated by one and the same reality. Further, property dualism denies the reducibility of one kind to the other; that of consciousness to physical property or vice versa. Among dualistic theories property dualism has wider acceptance than substance dualism. The major problem faced by substance dualism is to explain how these two entities interact. Descartes says that the interaction between matter and mind takes place in pineal gland.

On the other hand, unlike substance dualism, property dualism regards consciousness as a basic constituent of reality as in the case of matter. The relationship between matter and conscious mental properties is often explained by electromagnetic waves. In Chalmers words, - “In a way, what is going on here with consciousness is analogous to what happened with electromagnetism in the nineteenth century..... to explain electromagnetic phenomena, features such as electromagnetic charge and electromagnetic forces had to be taken as fundamental..... to explain consciousness, the features and laws of physical theory are not enough. For a theory of consciousness, new fundamental features and laws are needed.”¹⁰

Representationalism: In philosophical theories of consciousness, Representationalism is a theory that representation plays a central role. We all know that some of our psychological states are conscious or feel a certain way. For example, pain. We feel all our pains in some way. By ‘consciousness’ contemporary representationalists almost invariably intend phenomenal consciousness where for an episode in the mental life of a subject to be phenomenally conscious (to be an experience) is for there to be something the episode is like for the subject.¹¹ In such a case, it is said that the feature is among the phenomenal characters of the episode has the feature of phenomenally uncomfortable state. So for an experience of pain being phenomenally conscious have some phenomenal character. We may mention two kinds of representationalism – higher order and first order. According to higher-order representationalism, ‘a mental episode to be a certain way for its subject is just

for the episode to be represented to the subject as being that way: for the subject to undergo some mental episode which is correct as a representation if, and only if, the episode is that way.¹² Consider a judgement that England wins the 2017-below 17 World Cup Football in 2017. Both are in a sense, aspects of a subject's perspective on the world. On the other hand, first-order representationalism would take something like the following form: A feature may be a phenomenal character only if it is a representational property.¹³ Actually these two theories are compatible. Both are claiming that every phenomenal character is a representational property but that not every representational property is a phenomenal character.

Higher-Order Theories: Higher order theories of consciousness claim to give a naturalistic explanation of the difference between conscious and unconscious occurrences. According to such theory, we are conscious of something when we have a thought about it. So a mental state will be conscious if it is accompanied by a thought about that states. The occurrence of such a higher-order thought (HOT) makes us conscious of the mental state. There are two levels of conscious states in Higher Order Theories of consciousness. The first is 'First Order Representational state-(FOR) which is concern with sensation. The second is Higher Order Representational state (HOR) for which the FOR is an object. The mystery of consciousness lies in the twine level functioning of consciousness and can be explained in terms of the HO representation. There are two versions of Higher Order Theories; Higher Order Perception theory (HOP) and Higher Order Thought theory (HOT). HOP treats consciousness as having some perceptual element, where the HOR state perceives the FOR state.

Functionalism: According to 'functionalist theory of mind', all our mental properties are functional properties. The mental states that make up consciousness can essentially be defined as complex interactions between different functional processes. It does not identify mental functions with any sort of physical or material state. Functionalism differentiates between a function and their physical state. A house or building is a functional notion. It may be composed of any physical substance such as sand, stone chips, bricks, iron, cement etc. like this, mind or conscious functions, similarly, is a functional notion. When its material side is considered, the contribution is given by neurons. This makes the possibility of realizing the psychic phenomena with the help of different physical constituents other than neurons. This functionalistic account of mind explains conscious functions with the help of physical states other than neural states contributed much to the development of cognitive science. Functionalism views mind as a computer and this prompted the development of artificial intelligence (AI).

Epiphenomenalism: Epiphenomenalism holds that conscious events-like perceptual experiences, mental images, bodily sensations, emotional feelings etc. do not themselves have effects. \instead, our all behavior causally depends on neural events. Some of these neural events are also causes of our conscious events. The doctrine of epiphenomenalism maintains that physical states cause mental states, but mental states do not cause anything. William James was the first to use the term 'epiphenomena' to mean phenomena that lack

causal efficacy. Epiphenomenalism state that there is only one-way psychophysical action – from the physical to the mental. Since epiphenomenalism allows such causal action, it can embrace the causal theory of perception. Epiphenomenalism rejects the view that the mind is an unextended substance while maintaining that mental states and events are nonetheless distinct from physical states and events. Epiphenomenalism claims that we are ever intentional agents. Contemporary epiphenomenalism motivates by the view that ‘every step in the causation of our behavior, from sensory neuron activations to central neuron activations and re-entrant processes, to motor neuron activations and contractions of muscle cells, can be accounted for by physical principles applied to parts of the physical body.’¹⁴

Explanatory Gap: Even though physicalism is able to describe the phenomenon of consciousness to a great extent, it remains inexplicable that how these physical states give rise to the subjective mental phenomena. David Chalmers identifies the difference between the hard problem of consciousness (explanatory gap) and easy problems of consciousness. The easy problems are the problems related to cognition. Chalmers gives the psychological explanation of consciousness in contrast to the phenomenological explanation which is the hard problem. He provides a basic argument against materialism as follows:

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. Therefore materialism is false.¹⁵

Subjectivity and Qualia: Qualia are one of the important features of phenomenal consciousness. Generally some question may be arises in our mind that what is real nature of ‘qualia’. What are the kinds of qualia exist? Are all qualia play important role to study consciousness? – etc. When we talk about qualia, we normally assume that there are certain types of mental states; there is ‘something it is like to have them’. For example, we seem that there is something it is like to see the pink city of Jaipur, or to experience the pain of a right leg. Hume explains qualia by the example of color purple. He state that, “there is nothing but the idea of their color or tangibility, which can render them conceivable by the mind’. In other words qualia might be the things in the mind rather than attributes. The term ‘qualia’ was introduced by C.I.Lewis in 1929. Qualia are the contents of phenomenal consciousness. Mychel Tye gives the following definition of qualia: “Experiences vary widely. For example, I run my fingers over sandpaper, smell a skunk, feel a sharp pain in my finger, seem to see bright purple, become extremely angry. In each of these cases, I am the subject of a mental state with a very distinctive subjective character. There is something it is like for me to undergo each state, some phenomenology that it has. Philosophers often use the term ‘qualia’ to refer to the introspectively accessible properties of experiences that characterize what it is like to have them. In this standard, broad sense of the term, it is very difficult to deny that there are qualia.”¹⁶

The terms *quale* and *qualia* indicate the content of consciousness. They are either qualitative, experiential or felt property of mental states. Sometimes “phenomenal properties” and ‘qualitative features’ are used with the same meaning. The feelings of pains and itches – are differing in their ‘qualitative character’. Some theorist who accepts ‘act-object’ conception of perceptual experience qualia may include such properties as ‘phenomenal redness’ and ‘phenomenal roundness’ of the visual field. But who deny this conception, they do not reject qualia. Qualia are thought of as non-intentional. The notion of qualia goes against the physicalistic theories of consciousness. The famous notion of ‘what it is like’ best describes the notion of qualia. In his argument against identity theory, Thomas Nagel explains that subjectivity cannot be identical with or reduced to objective physical properties. He gives the example of our understanding of the way the bats navigate. Since we cannot have ‘vision’ using ultrasound, we have no idea of ‘what it is like to be a bat’. ---

“To illustrate the connection between subjectivity and a point of view -----I assume we all believe that bats have experience. -----[bat] has very poor vision, I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, ----- therefore, to the conclusion that there are facts that do not consist in the truth of propositions expressible in a human language. We can be compelled to recognize the existence of such facts without being able to state or comprehend them.”¹⁷

A similar approach to the uniqueness of qualia is put forward by Frank Jackson’s thought experiment about Mary, the colour scientist. So the experiencing of the phenomenal content of consciousness is something in addition to the physicalistic understanding of that experiencing. In that case the mental content (qualia) must be different from its physical counterpart in some respect. Susan Blackmore explains the plausibility of using the explanation of blindseer for the separate identity of subjective feeling (qualia).

-“Blindsight looks, at first sight, to be a clincher for theories of consciousness. -----the blindseer has objective vision without subjective consciousness; he is a partial zombie who can see without having the qualia of seeing; this proves that consciousness is an added extra and is separate from the physical functions of vision; it proves that qualia exist and that functionalism and materialism are false.”¹⁸

Thomas Nagel raised the question, “what is it like to be a bat?”¹⁹. Mentioning the ‘bats’ example, he wants to demonstrate that our subjective and objective experiences are quite different. The objective experiences are related to the processing of information in the brain, but the subjective experiences are entirely our own feeling. It cannot be ‘shared’ with others. David Chalmers calls such feelings or subjective experiences as ‘qualia’ which also constitutes the so-called “hard problem” of consciousness.

Here I can mention another special feature of phenomenal consciousness called ‘Zombie’. Zombies are logically conceivable creatures having all its physical features

similar to normal human beings. The difference between normal human beings and zombies is that the later do not have consciousness or subjective experiences. The logical possibility of 'a physically identical zombie world' makes the materialistic to have an erroneous position. If physical stuff supervenes the psychological states, or if they both are identical, then the physical states must cause the psychological states. The conception of zombies goes against this. David. J. Chalmers is concerned with phenomenal zombies which are physically and functionally identical, but lacking experience. In his words,—"A zombie is just something physically identical to me, but which has no conscious experience – all is dark inside".²⁰

III

So in our above discussion we have seen that phenomenal consciousness is also identified with experience. Curiously there are a significant number of philosophers and neuro-scientist who deny the existence of phenomenal consciousness. Let us see the position of the said philosophers.

According to materialism phenomenal consciousness appears to have no function. It is epiphenomenal. It seems to be observation rather than action. Leibniz proposed that science should be amended because it was in conflict with observation.²¹ Some thinkers especially D.C.Dennett holds that phenomenal consciousness does not exist. It is a type of eliminativism. D.C.Dennett (1978) applies eliminativism to phenomenal consciousness. He says, "Everything real has properties, and since, I don't deny the reality of conscious experience, I grant that conscious experience has properties".²² These properties are actually judgments of properties. These judgments of properties are insubstantial. So qualia can be rejected as non-substantial. In other words, Dennett denies the existence of ineffable, intrinsic, private properties known as qualia.

Like Dennett, many philosophers and neuroscientists believe that the problem of phenomenal consciousness does not exist. They seem that what we call 'conscious' can only be a property of the functions performed by the brain and body. According to these philosophers only access consciousness exists. But it is a mystery how access consciousness might be experienced if phenomenal consciousness does not exist. David Chalmers (1996) stated the philosophical problem of phenomenal consciousness as hard problem. The hard problem can be consciously defined as "how to explain a state of consciousness in terms of its neurological basis".²³ But the hard problem cannot be solved because whatever the phenomenal consciousness is it cannot be explained by neural correlates.

Further, some eliminativists like P.S.Churchland, D.C.Dennett and G.Rey think that phenomenal consciousness does not exist. On the other hand, functionalist and physicalist draw a reductionist conclusion with regard to phenomenal consciousness. According to them, there are no mystey so far as the physical basis of consciousness concerned. Though they admit such a thing as consciousness they do not admit any singular explanatory gap. For them, whatever explanatory gap will remain as unremarkable. According to C. McGinn, consciousness is a natural phenomenon but we are bound to be deterred by the problem in

understanding the physical basis of consciousness. He tries to show that though the physical properties of our brain do explain consciousness, yet it is available only to other type of being and closed off to us.

Again, O.Flanagan and J.Searle admit that there may be significant differences between the naturalistic explanation of consciousness and that of other phenomena. But they point out that this does not warrant us to conclude that consciousness is something non-natural or that it cannot be explained in naturalistic terms. Reductionists, in general, do not distinguish phenomenal consciousness from the cognitive, intentional or functional concept of consciousness. They try to show that phenomenal consciousness requires the concept of self and, so, is a form of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, we have seen, is the possession of the concept of the self as well as the ability to use this concept about one-self. In response to such attempts Ned Block says that such a claim imposes an “implausible intellectual condition on phenomenal consciousness”. It is possible that phenomenally conscious states involve a non-conceptual content that could be identified as “experienced as mine”. However, Block points out that this representational aspect does not exhaust the phenomenal properties of that state.

Similar attempts have been made by identifying monitoring consciousness with the phenomenal consciousness. Monitoring consciousness comes in many forms. One of its forms is ‘internal scanning’. It is an obvious mistake to conflate internal scanning with phenomenal consciousness. G.Rey points out that it will be silly to consider our laptop computers as conscious because it is capable of internal scanning. He also suggests that internal scanning is sufficient for consciousness, if there is any such thing. From these observations he goes on to conclude that the concept of consciousness is incoherent because it both admits and denies consciousness of laptop computers. In response to such claim Ned Block points out that internal scanning is not sufficient for phenomenal consciousness. This is enough to show that the concept of consciousness is a coherent concept.

So in conclusion, we can say that the concept of phenomenal consciousness is a puzzling concept. All philosophical discussion fails to capture the real nature of phenomenal consciousness from their point of views. We can only say that phenomenal consciousness is conceptually different from other types of consciousness. Some mental states are phenomenal because of its phenomenal content, or the phenomenal aspect of the content. Also we can say that phenomenal consciousness is not a functional notion. A for example, suppose a robot with a computer brain has been developed, this robot is behaviorally and computationally identical with us. Is the robot having the said qualities is identical with human beings? Certainly it cannot enjoy the status of a ‘man’. In this case the robot is nothing but a ‘Zombie’.

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