

Does the Psi Data Reveal Something about the Nature of Consciousness? **George Williams***

Abstract

The problem of consciousness is famously daunting. The basic problem remains how to fit our inherently subjective experiences into our scientific understanding, which is based on objective methodologies. Our scientific theories are developed using objective, third-person generated data and methods. However, as Nagel noted in his famous paper *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?* Accessing the subjective character of experience for other conscious organisms is impossible. Our only knowledge of subjective experience comes from accessing it directly from within.

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Introduction

Our inability of observing conscious experience in an objective or public way appears to present us with an unsurmountable difficulty toward making progress on explaining consciousness. Those who accept Chalmers's [1] characterization of the "hard problem of consciousness" often agree with him that consciousness is likely fundamental (not emergent from matter) in some sense and that physicalist explanations cannot succeed. However, the alternative frameworks they propose, which include versions of dualism and panpsychism, are so far unaccompanied by testable implications. And physicalists who do not favor such alternatives are generally unpersuaded by philosophical arguments that do not also make empirical contact with the objective world

Phenomenal consciousness

The difficulty of fitting conscious experience into our understanding of the world, as well as the impossibility of gathering objective data on their phenomenal aspect, has led some philosophers, such as Keith Frankish [2], to attack the notion of phenomenal consciousness itself. For advocates of illusionism, our common-sense notion of conscious experience is likely mistaken, primarily due to the difficulty of fitting it within a physicalist or materialist theoretical framework. Given the success of our physicalist theories, Frankish [2] counsels against any move that might involve a radical rethinking of our current understanding, as accepting as real our phenomenal experiences would seem to require. Illusionists thus prefer to avoid recognizing phenomenal consciousness as a datum that needs to be explained.

However, consciousness is perhaps justifiably characterized as

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anomalous with respect to our current theories and frameworks. Nothing in physics or chemistry remotely hints at anything like conscious experience. Chalmers [1] has argued that the problem is sufficiently difficult that a radical move (or two) might be necessary. The anomalous nature of consciousness suggests the possibility that some theories we might develop could spill over in the direction of other anomalous features, perhaps in ways we could test. What kind of theory and what kind of anomalous data remains to be seen. However, it happens that currently various kinds of anomalous data exist that are intimately linked to consciousness. These data are generally called psi, which is an umbrella term used for such anomalous behavior as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and psychokinesis.

Meta-analyses for psi evidence

Cardeña [3] has provided a comprehensive summary of the extant meta-analyses for psi evidence. He noted that the overall evidence 'provides cumulative support for the reality of psi, which cannot be readily explained away by the quality of the studies, fraud, selective reporting, experimental or analytical incompetence, or other frequent criticisms' [1]. He also noted that the rigor of the psi experimental methodology has increased with time, often including analyses for possible publication bias as well as the quality of the studies. At this point, we can note that we have on the table a considerable amount of anomalous but replicated data that could be critical in evaluating various theories of consciousness.

However, Reber and Alcock [4] strongly attacked Cardeña's [3] presentation and broadly dismissed all of the paper's findings.

They did so, however, without citing any flaws in the data or methodology. Their arguments against accepting the data were based on what they viewed as the conflict between psi and our current scientific understanding. As they put it:

If the physicalist-materialist framework of modern science is correct within the bounds of demonstrability and theoretical coherency and everything that has been learned through science says it is the fact that claimed parapsychological phenomena are so grossly inconsistent with that framework suggests that they are all but impossible and that the claims made by proponents cannot be true.

But this very close to Frankish's illusionist argument against accepting our phenomenal experience as real. However, if we have accepted that conscious experience is real, yet anomalous with respect to our current physicalist theories, we might be reluctant to dismiss an additional set of anomalous data associated with consciousness, in this case objective laboratory data that have been vetted by scientific peers. If we take our conscious experience as anomalous in the sense that its subjective nature does not fit with physicalist explanations, the basis for rejecting the psi data (because they do not fit with physicalist explanations) is weakened. On this point, we have never encountered a serious criticism of the psi data that also accepts the hard problem of consciousness. If we recognize that the psi data are closely linked with consciousness, we might consider that the psi data and subjective experience reflect different modes or properties around consciousness, a possibility that could motivate us to take a closer look.

Discussion

In our recent paper, we proposed a framework that both addresses the hard problem of consciousness and is consistent with the psi data summarized [3]. This study begins with a position, often associated with Bertrand Russell, which has recently gained traction among philosophers of mind. Russell noted that that our scientific understanding of the world does not reveal its intrinsic or most essential aspect. That is, physics, which provides our most sophisticated understanding of what constitutes our world, only provides us with structural or relational descriptions. This argument suggests that our scientific theories, based on abstract mathematical descriptions, are silent on the question of the world's intrinsic nature. Russell also observed that our knowledge of our conscious states, which we acquire directly and without abstract equations or theories, gives us our only knowledge of something with an intrinsic aspect. Since we are otherwise ignorant of the world's intrinsic nature, Russell argued we are free to take this intrinsic nature, based on our direct experiences of the world, as the same (or having the same basis) as the intrinsic aspect of the physical world.

Taking consciousness as intimately linked with the intrinsic aspect of our physical world indicates a way to avoid the radical emergence that physicalism seems to require. Also, this union between matter and consciousness at the core of our existence implies that the causal closure of the physical world need not

present a problem, as it does with dualism. Thus, Russellian monism looks very promising for those who view consciousness as fundamental in some sense.

Unfortunately, this philosophical argument (often called Russellian monism) faces its own share of challenges. For many, this view leads to a version of constitutive panpsychism, the view that the subatomic particles that constitute the world are conscious (perhaps only to a tiny degree). This might be a turn-off for many. But perhaps a more formidable challenge is that constitutive panpsychism faces is the combination problem: how do micro-experiences combine to yield our familiar macro-experiences? Many consider the combination problem to be a formidable issue for constitutive panpsychism [1].

In addition to these challenges, the question arises on how we can characterize further or pin down this aspect of the world that is arguably inscrutable to physics. If our scientific methods can't scrutinize this ontologically deeper ground or most fundamental aspect of the world, what more can we say about it, aside from relying only on our conscious experiences?

In recent work, Author suggested that we consider this intrinsic or most fundamental aspect of the world as a quantum ground [5,6]. In the paper, Ismael and Schaffer note that quantum mechanics exhibits non-separability in the sense that nature 'allows spatiotemporally separated entities to have states that cannot be fully specified without reference to each other'. This entanglement between states of entities, they argue, cannot be understood in terms of causal relationships between such entities. Instead, such correlated behavior between entities is most likely consistent with the presence of a common ground that coordinates the underlying probabilistic nature between states. While this common ground is not described in the quantum formalism, they nevertheless are able to infer it from the behavior of the correlated entities. This common ground establishes a metaphysical relationship between relatively derivative entities, the particles that constitute our world, with something ontologically prior. Thus, the different components of entangled systems are ultimately grounded in an integrated whole, ontologically fundamental to its components.

The metaphysical status of this quantum ground, inhabiting a high-dimensional space and thus not confined to the causal, spatiotemporal order and holistically orchestrating the relationships between quantum states, suggests an intriguing candidate for whatever ultimately grounds the relationships described by physics. Based on its non-structural and fundamental properties, Author submitted the reason to focus here as the inscrutable or intrinsic aspect of the world. And following Russellian monism, this quantum ground within wave function space is also an attractive candidate for the basis of consciousness. In this paper the author discusses that they usefully characterize this ontologically prior ground, as potential matter or 'potentia.'

Invoking some notion of 'potentia' to characterize the probabilistic nature of quantum mechanics was proposed by Heisenberg [7] and more recently by Stapp [8]. However, their interpretations do differ from mine in various ways.

Overall, we have good reasons for viewing the quantum ground as an attractive candidate for Russell's notion of an intrinsic aspect for the world, an ontologically prior nonlocal ground of potentialities fundamental to our spatiotemporal order. And following Russellian monism, this deeper stratum of potentialities is also the ground of our experience, and perhaps true agency as well. Also, author suggests that these attributes, which include nonlocality, ground of potentialities, and foundation for experience and volition, provide a framework that fits well with the psi data.

In this proposed Study, the foundation of phenomenal experience is a shared 'space,' albeit one that is nonlocal and high-dimensional. Thus, our consciousness (or perhaps unconsciousness) may be rooted in a universal quantum ground, characterized as an underlying stratum of potentialities, possessing a wealth of information on the configuration on our world. Perhaps our conscious experiences are more wave-like or 'spread out' than our conventional understanding suggests. Perhaps this could support experiences of hunches or intuitions that are often dismissed yet happen to be veridical. Author considered that the inherently probabilistic and nonlocal nature of this common ground presents something that fits with a number of different modes of psi. In this paper, author go into some depth discussing how this framework supports virtually all of the various categories of psi presented in Cardena's [3] summaries of meta-analyses.

If this proposed framework is correct, what are the possible implications? Within this framework, our intuition may be accessing of information *via* an inherently holistic and nonlocal field or ground, which underlies our world. Perhaps, as we are guided by impulses or motivations from this deeper field, we are likely to feel more intimately connected to our environment. And perhaps suggests a way of avoiding feeling disconnected, alienated, and disenchanting from our world. If this framework is correct, we might put more weight on what Jung termed synchronicity, where we experience a sort of meaning from apparently disconnected events. Through receiving or intuiting information intimately connected with the whole community (or world), we may experience greater meaning.

Conclusion

The theory outlined here also suggests that a very different reframing around our relationships may be warranted. We might consider that experiences of sincere compassion may be giving us moments of greater connection with others, more than we now appreciate. Perhaps feeling such deeper connection may lead to greater understanding as well. Through feeling information *via* such a nonlocal channel, we might intuit the needs of others and be of greater service. To the degree that our actions are guided or informed by this field of unified potentialities, our actions arguably have stronger or wider benefit toward others.

Of course, much of this remains speculation and given the formidable nature of the problem of consciousness, we expand our thinking toward outside-the-box solutions.

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