

Chalmers, Scrutability, and Phenomenal Truths

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I first met Valtteri Arstila at the beginning of the 2000s when I acted as an external examiner for his licentiate thesis at the University of Turku. A bit later, we met and had fun together in New York. Ever since, I have followed the development of his career with respect and delight. Much of Valtteri's research focuses on the experience of time and colors. I don't feel I would have much to offer concerning those topics. However, more generally, Valtteri and I have always shared an interest in phenomenal consciousness. I want to congratulate Valtteri on his special day with this little note related to the latter theme.

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David Chalmers's *scrutability thesis* plays an increasingly central role in his thought (see esp. Chalmers 2012). This thesis is intended to provide a foundation for his epistemic two-dimensional semantics (see Chalmers 2006, 2012), which in turn plays an important role in Chalmers's argument against physicalism (see esp. Chalmers 2009). His favored version of the scrutability thesis says that *all truths* are *a priori* knowable from certain basic truths.

Chalmers contends that all truths (of, say, everyday knowledge and various special sciences) are scrutable *a priori*, roughly, from physical and phenomenal truths. More exactly, Chalmers adds that the base still needs to be complemented, first with (at least two) indexical truths (e.g., "I am such-and-such," "Now is such-and-such"), and second with a totality or "that's-all" truth (which entails various negative truths, such as "there are no ghosts"). Chalmers thus argues that all ordinary truths are *a priori* entailed by this class, which he abbreviates as *PQTI*

(physical, qualia, that's-all, indexical). *PQTI* is Chalmers's standard or default base (see Chalmers 2012; cf. Chalmers & Jackson 2001).¹

As to *P*, Chalmers writes:

Let *P* be the class of physical truths, including microphysical truths (truths about fundamental physical entities in the *language* of a completed *fundamental physics*) and macrophysical truths (truths about any entities, including macroscopic entities, in the *language* of *classical physics*). (Chalmers 2012, 110; my emphasis)²

Chalmers characterizes *Q* as follows:

Let *Q* be the class of phenomenal (or experiential) truths: truths about *what it is like* to be a given entity. Phenomenal truths will take the form 'There exists an entity with such-and-such phenomenal properties at such-and-such time', where phenomenal properties are properties specifying what it is like to be an entity. Phenomenal properties will be picked out using expressions for pure phenomenal concepts (Chalmers 2003), concepts that pick out phenomenal properties according to their *phenomenal character*: intuitively, a pure phenomenal concept of a phenomenal property is the sort of concept that would be deployed in knowledge of *what it is like to have that property*. (Chalmers 2012, 110–111; my emphasis)

However, in his defense of the scrutability thesis, Chalmers seems to be sliding, in the case of phenomenal truths *Q*, from one thing to another without noticing: On the one hand, according to his "official" definition, they only contain truths about pure phenomenal ("what is it like") experiences, or *qualia*. On the other hand, Chalmers often seems to assume in practice that the phenomenal truths can do all the epistemological work that observational statements do in the philosophy of science; that they cover all possible observational evidence about the world. This seems to give more plausibility to his *a priori* scrutability thesis (see, e.g., Chalmers 2012, 121–123, 126; cf. Chalmers & Jackson 2001, 329).

¹ I have scrutinized Chalmers's thesis critically, from different angles, in an earlier work (Raatikainen 2014; cf. Raatikainen 2021a, 2021b). This short note can be seen as complementing that critical discussion.

² In Chalmers and Jackson 2001, it is assumed that mere microphysical truths suffice.

However, the latter is arguably a much broader class of truths (or perhaps even a distinct class; see below) and is not limited to pure phenomenal experiences (even if some early logical positivists may have assumed that purely phenomenal truths would suffice).

Consider a textbook example of observation in science: determining the melting point of lead. The observational data consist of a series of measurements, namely thermometer readings. This is quite different from pure *qualia*. Or think of Mendel's observations over many years of the properties of peas, such as height, flower color, seed color, and seed shape; Darwin's systematic observations about the size and shape of the beaks of finches on the Galápagos Islands; Morgan's thousands of observations of the various traits (such as the color of the eyes, or the size of the wings) of fruit flies. In economics, observations may consist, for example, of certain numerical values of the gross domestic product or consumer price index. Unlike pure *qualia*, such scientific observations require considerable conceptualization (such observations are "theory-laden," to use the popular slogan).

Furthermore, the phenomenal aspect, the subjective "feel" of such observations, appears to be quite irrelevant. It seems plausible that a philosophical Zombie or a (with respect to phenomenal consciousness) unconscious intelligent robot could well make such observations and record them. If one takes Jackson's famous Knowledge Argument (Jackson 1982)³ seriously, as Chalmers seemingly does, pure phenomenal truths look like a bad candidate for evidence in science: if it is impossible to infer first-person phenomenal ("what is it like") knowledge from objective scientific knowledge, then, conversely, phenomenal knowledge cannot falsify objective scientific theories. There does not seem to be the right sort of inferential relation between these two realms. If this is so, pure phenomenal experiences cannot play the relevant epistemic role in the inference of any conventional intersubjectively communicable objective knowledge.

Some observations in physics can perhaps be classified as macrophysical truths, and hence be covered by Chalmers's *P*. However, it is quite clear that a great many crucial observations in, say, biology, psychology, or economics, which are conceptualized to be evidentially relevant for such special sciences, just cannot.

³ In Jackson's original thought experiment, Mary is locked in a black and white room. Her knowledge before her release focuses on neurophysiology. But quite obviously she can be given any amount of objective scientific knowledge from any discipline without altering the conclusions (this became clear to me in discussion with Tim Crane).

It seems the phenomenal truths and observational truths relevant for various special sciences are quite different classes. The former at least constitute too narrow a class. If my final reflections above are on the right track, they are not even necessary or useful at all for science. Be that as it may, Chalmers's scrutability thesis consequently looks much less plausible.⁴

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⁴ I would like to thank Jaakko Kuorikoski for the valuable discussions about observation in science, and Carl Hoefer and David Papineau for their useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.