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In Defence of Chalmers: A Comment on Korf

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In "*Qualia in a Contemporary Neurobiological Perspective*" (2015), Korf tackles the perennial issue of qualia in the philosophy of mind. His discussion is partly a response to Chalmers' (1996) hard problem, which, as evidenced by other recent discussions in *Dialogues* (Earp, 2012; Soleiman, 2015), remains fresh after nearly two decades. Korf highlights the importance of regarding each brain as a particular shaped by unique contingencies and suggests how neurobiological research might proceed in light of this. However, I argue that his discussion does not address what is at the core of Chalmers' hard problem, and so fails to bridge the gap between neurobiological processes and qualia.

To explicate Chalmers' argument, physical processes in the brain do not go on "in the dark", but are accompanied by first-person subjective experience. No amount of third-person physical information about the structure and dynamics of a system entails this first-person subjective experience. Its existence, then, remains an extra fact beyond the complete physical facts. Therefore, physicalism is false, dualism is true, and consciousness is ontologically fundamental. Interestingly, a variant of this argument has recently been used to show that neutral monism is false by highlighting the failure of entailment from neutral non-phenomenal facts to phenomenal facts (Blamauer, 2013).

The crux of the hard problem, then, is that subjective experience cannot be reduced to objective properties, hence Chalmers' contention that qualia cannot be explained by neurobiology. In a response partly reminiscent of Dennett (1988), Korf suggests that the unique developmental trajectories of individual brains might provide insight into the apparent idiosyncracies of qualia. However, this misses the point. The problem presented by Chalmers is not why the flavour of a quale eludes characterisation by general laws, but why a neurobiological process should be accompanied by subjective experience at all. Perhaps this reflects Korf's conflation of two senses of "subjective". When he talks about "individual and subjective influences on brain neurophysiology" (p.44), he appears to be talking about those idiosyncratic influences that pertain to a specific person's brain. However, when Chalmers talks about the "subjective quality of experience" (Chalmers, 1996, p.4), he means the first-person ontology of conscious experience. The former sense does not entail the other. Hence, even if individual brains are unique, as Korf convincingly argues, this does not provide any reason why these brains should be accompanied by conscious experiences.

A second critical point concerns Korf's suggestion that experience is "an emergent brain process" (p.42). He appeals to Searle's (1992) liquidity example to support this. However, he seems to have overlooked Chalmers' response that this is a false analogy. Although liquidity may not seem obvious from the study of individual H2O molecules, it is nonetheless entailed by their physical properties:

> "Given all the microphysical facts about a particular batch of H2O, it is logically impossible that those facts could hold without liquidity being instantiated" (Chalmers, 1996, p.130).

The presence of qualia, on the other hand, is not entailed by physical facts about structure and dynamics, as highlighted by the conceivability argument. Therefore, subjective experience brings something ontologically novel into the picture in a way that liquidity does not.

Overall, Korf's paper is an insightful exploration of how the processing of sensory information is shaped by autobiographical contingencies that are unique to the individual brain. However, the hard problem of why such processing is accompanied by experience at all is not resolved. And so, the discussion falls short of providing an account of qualia.

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