

Compositional Subjects: A physicalist approach to the problem of experience

Anand Rangarajan

Why should any physical event necessarily be accompanied by experience? This hard problem of experience (formulated by Chalmers) is at the foundation of consciousness studies. The approach taken in this work is to expand physicalism in order to accommodate experience. Before embarking on this project however, we begin with phenomenology in order to motivate the common sense intuition that guides our strategy. First, experience exists. Furthermore, we argue (from phenomenology and van Inwagen, Lowe and Strawson) that experience is always accompanied by a subject of experience. The latter, following Strawson, is conceived as a thin subject which is spatially and temporally bounded. Thin subjects should not be confused with living organisms and may only last a few seconds. Thin subjects exhibit a phenomenal unity with different types of phenomenal content (sensations, thoughts etc.) occurring during their temporal existence. Next, we begin with the assumption that physicalism is sufficient to explain experience (and thin subjects). Following Stoljar, we invoke our ignorance of the true physical as a way to sidestep the explanatory gap between present day physical processes (events, properties) and experience. Furthermore, physicalism does not imply (as Hüttemann has shown) that microphysicalism—the thesis that macro physical properties are determined by micro physical properties—holds. We invoke this freedom to conceive of thin subjects as physical compositions with macro properties that are not determined by micro properties. Compositionality has been intensely studied in the past twenty years. While there is no clear consensus here, we argue, following Koslicki, that a case can be made for a restricted neo-Aristotelian compositionality principle and that thin subjects are physical compositions of a certain natural kind. It turns out that compositionality requires the notion of an object to be independently motivated by an appeal to natural kinds—with thin subjects shown to meet the criteria of a natural kind. Finally, the approach is specialized to a thin subject of sensation.

It is worth examining the consequence of failure of each step in this sequence leading to alternative positions on the hard problem:

1. There is experience: Denied by eliminativists.
2. Experience implies (thin) subjects of experience: Usually denied by materialists and some panpsychists.
3. Everything is physical or entailed by the physical: Denied by interactionist dualists.
4. Physicalism does not imply microphysicalism: the most controversial aspect of this approach and denied by many physicalists.
5. Subjects of experience are physical compositions of a certain natural kind: Denied by idealists and property dualists.

We summarize our overall position based on the above discussion. The problem of experience requires us to posit new psychophysical relations linking physical properties and experience. Drawing upon phenomenological intuition and driven by the need to avoid proliferation of *sui generis* relations, we introduced thin compositional physical subjects of experience which are of a certain natural kind. This approach is facilitated by the failure of microphysicalism to hold. The price of admission is an expansion of the basic furniture of the world to include compositional subjects—a tolerable expansion due to extreme familiarity with the subject.