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Book Review: The Conscious Mind In Search Of A Fundamental Theory

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incompatible with determinism without thereby counting as "libertarian."

12. See David Widerker, "Libertarian Freedom and the Avoidability of Decisions," *Faith and Philosophy* 12.1 (January 1995): 113-118; John M. Fischer, "Libertarianism and Avoidability: A Reply to Widerker," *Ibid*: 119-125; David Widerker, "Libertarianism and Frankfurt's Attack on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities," *The Philosophical Review* 104.2 (April 1995): 247-261; David P. Hunt, "Frankfurt-Counterexamples: Some Comments on the Widerker-Fischer Debate," *Faith and Philosophy* 13.3 (July 1996): 395-401; David Widerker and Charlotte Katzoff, "Avoidability and Libertarianism," *Ibid*: 415-421; Alfred Mele and David Robb, "Rescuing Frankfurt-Style Cases," *The Philosophical Review* 107.1 (January 1998): 97-111; and now Daniel J. Speak, "Fischer and Avoidability: A Reply to Widerker and Katzoff," *Faith and Philosophy* 16.2 (April 1999): 239-247.

13. At least identification with the desire that motivated the act is *sufficient* for responsibility for the act, in Frankfurt's view. His treatment of other examples implies that it may not be necessary, however. As I read him, the necessary condition Frankfurt isolates in other cases is one of omission: that the agent did *not* identify with any desires opposed to the desire on which she acted. See Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy*, 68.1 (January, 1971); reprinted in *The Importance of What We Care About*: 11-25.

14. This leaves it open for libertarians to argue that among the conditions on responsibility for higher-order willing is a libertarian requirement of being able to avoid a given volitional identification or being able to identify otherwise. In that case, the willing addict will seem responsible for taking the drug, even though he could not avoid taking it, only because we tacitly assume that it was open to him in the past to be an unwilling addict. I explored this idea in "Conditions for Freedom of the Higher-Order Will: Frankfurt and Augustine," presented at the Eastern Division meeting of the *American Philosophical Association*, (Atlanta, GA, December 28, 1996).

15. This argument may not seem to cover the sort of "global" Frankfurt-type cases developed by Mele and Robb in "Rescuing Frankfurt-style Cases," *The Philosophical Review* 197.1 (January 1998), by David Hunt in "Moral Responsibility and Unavoidable Action," *Philosophical Studies* 96 (December 1999), and by Eleonore Stump in "Alternative Possibilities and Responsibility: The Flicker of Freedom," *Journal of Ethics* (1999): 1-26. I believe my account will handle such cases, but this will require further argument.

16. And then clearly, even if the action, omission, or consequence were inevitable, our responsibility for it would again still ultimately have incompatibilist conditions.

17. Stump, "Persons: Identification and Freedom," *Philosophical Topics* 24.2 (Fall 1996): 200-206.

The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory, by **David Chalmers**

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The *Conscious Mind* is certainly an ambitious book, and in many ways an impressive one. Chalmers argues for a bold and unfashionable thesis. The argument is often ingenious and ambitious, and at the (many) points

where I wanted to raise objections and difficulties I usually found that Chalmers had foreseen them and had something to say in reply. The style is lucid, and largely free of distracting technicalities. There is much in the book that will impress philosophers and perhaps a wider audience.

Having said this much in praise, I must now confess that I found most of the conclusions wholly implausible and unconvincing. Chalmers is a paradigmatically systematic philosopher, and it is perhaps the Achilles' heel of such philosophers to be much more drawn to *Modus ponens* than *Modus tollens*. The central theses of the book are, first and foremost, the defence of a certain version of mind-body dualism, secondly and rather more tentatively, a version of panpsychism, and as a considerably more tentative afterthought, an enthusiasm for Everett's "many worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics (the scare quotes indicate that Chalmers thinks this a misnomer for Everett's theory). Any of these conclusions might lead many to wonder whether they had perhaps started out with a questionable premise. As I personally find the most crucial of the premises on which Chalmers argument is based wholly untenable on independent grounds, I have no hesitation in taking these conclusions as further confirmation of my skepticism.

The central argument of the book can be fairly simply summarized. First assume that the world ultimately consists of a closed system of microphysical particles evolving solely in accord with some set of physical laws. Macrophysical objects and their properties, given this conception, are found to be "logically supervenient" on this underlying microphysical world (not necessarily just those bits of the latter that constitute them, though). That is to say, given the microphysical state of things, the macrophysical states could not be otherwise. But there is also a set of phenomena of consciousness (qualia, what it feels like to be something, etc.) that are not thus logically supervenient on the microphysical. This is ascertained by the observation that there could be beings identical to ourselves (the paradigmatic vehicles of consciousness) in all respects except that they lacked consciousness. Chalmers calls these hypothetical beings "zombies." This possibility shows that the phenomena of consciousness are non-physical. Chalmers then argues that though not logically supervenient on the physical, consciousness is almost certainly nomologically dependent on the physical. There must therefore be, in addition to the laws of physics, psychophysical laws determining the appearance of consciousness in physical systems of certain kinds. This is the picture he calls Naturalistic Dualism. In an attempt to lay the groundwork of a scientific theory of consciousness he suggests further that consciousness may be a universal correlate of information, a suggestion that provides the core of the version of panpsychism he cautiously endorses.

The most fundamental premise on which the whole of Chalmers book rests is the first, a commitment to a certain conception of the scope and nature of science. This is the view that almost everything in the world can be explained, in principle at least, in terms of the laws of physics. Physics (the physics of fundamental particles), he assumes, describes a closed system, and ultimately must account for every physical event that occurs. Since even people or societies are ultimately composed of nothing but

physical parts, their doings are also conceived of as physical events and are thus to be explained in terms of physical laws. He is, that is to say, committed to a largely unqualified reductionism. Admittedly the physical facts may be a bit complicated for us to handle, but a "superbeing...would be able to straightforwardly 'read off' all the biological facts, once given all the microphysical facts" (p.35). Later he remarks that "In most areas of science, all we [not, I take it, superbeings] need to take for granted are the laws of physics and some boundary conditions" (p.214), and even "Almost everything in the world can be explained in physical terms" (p.93).

It is striking, at least to one like myself who finds this premise incredible, that there is little argument for it. A crucial distinction should be noted here. Chalmers offers some arguments for the fairly plausible thesis that if all the microphysical facts throughout space and time are given, then the higher level facts will be determined. Any world in which the entire spatio-temporal manifold of physical particles and their properties was identical to this one, would also be identical in all higher-level respects. (As has already been indicated, Chalmers believes this only with a crucial exception for consciousness.) This is true, perhaps, simply because higher level things are made, probably exclusively, of lower level things. It is quite another matter to say that higher level events or processes are *caused* solely by underlying microphysical events. For this we need to assume also that everything that happens at the microphysical level is fully explainable by the laws and facts of microphysics. Chalmers does not always clearly distinguish these two aspects of microphysical determination, presumably because he takes the causal closure of physics as too obvious to be worth discussing or, at least, as no more than a corollary of taking science seriously (p. xiii).

The distinction just indicated can perhaps be made clearer by adverting once more to Chalmers' superbeing. Although I allowed that higher level facts might be determined by the totality of microphysical facts, this does not mean that even the superbeing would have an adequate picture of what was happening in the world simply by virtue of knowing this totality of facts. It is not even clear that the superbeing would have a proper understanding of what was going on at the physical level. For if, as I believe, there are autonomous causal processes at higher organisational levels, then the superbeing will not know why certain microphysical states succeed other such states. If, for example, a large number of microphysical particles move in a coherent way because I decide to wave my arm, then it will take a knowledge of my psychology to explain the movements of microphysical things. If this sounds strange, one should reflect that this is certainly the only explanation we have any access to concerning typical movements of small parts of my arm and, barring the most improbable kind of reductionism, the only one we can reasonably anticipate. So the strangeness in question can only derive from some kind of metaphysical commitment, a source we should surely treat with caution.

A conception of science like Chalmers' does, indeed, seem to be almost universally assumed by philosophers of mind. And Chalmers is not alone in treating it as too obvious to require any argument. As one engaged more often with the philosophy of science than the philosophy of mind, on the other hand, it seems to me that we should at the very least see this

assumption as in need of some support. A natural ground for the assumption of a physics of universal scope would be real live reductionism, practical achievements of explaining the behaviour of more complex entities in terms of those of physics. But though once widely supposed to be a central part of the scientific agenda, more recently many philosophers of science have come to see this goal as largely irrelevant to the practice of science. The project of explaining biological phenomena in terms of those of chemistry, despite the undoubted triumphs of molecular biology, has proved illusory, and the reduction of the human or the social sciences seems less plausible still. Serious doubts are even raised about the reduction of chemistry to physics.

It is true that the reaction to this failure has not generally been to question the assumption of an underlying closed and complete physics. It is possible to take many of the reasons for the failure of reductionism as "merely practical", depending, for instance, on the limits of our computational powers, and argue that everything still depends, in some way regrettably inaccessible to us, on the underlying physics. This is apparent in the proliferation of supervenience theses, theses designed precisely to capture the idea of the dependence of phenomena on a lower structural level but without commitment to any systematically intelligible nomological relations.

What I want to emphasize is that the move to such explicitly non-empirical expressions of the universality of physical law raises deep problems about why we should believe the thesis so expressed. Chalmers, as I remarked above, takes the assumption of the closure of physics to be one of the corollaries of taking science seriously (p.xiii). But surely "taking science seriously" should not extend beyond taking seriously the (broadly speaking) empirical results of science. And therefore the assumption in question is not part of taking science seriously, but rather one of assuming a certain metaphysics of science, or even perhaps a mythology of science. No doubt the laws of physics are generally expressed in universal forms, but the commitment to take this seriously would be naive. The experimental results of microphysics relate to the behaviour of particles in more or less isolated situations achieved at the cost of enormous labor and ingenuity. To suppose that science has somehow shown that these laws apply to indefinitely complex situations in interaction with arbitrarily complex and numerous other situations is not "taking science seriously" but a gigantic leap of faith.¹

At any rate, as I have noted, this leap of faith is made with one major reservation: consciousness cannot be explained by appeal to the laws of physics. At the beginning of the book, and at many places throughout, Chalmers makes much of the idea that he insists on taking consciousness (like science) seriously. This position is in opposition to philosophers who either deny the existence of consciousness altogether, or attempt to define it in terms of something merely cognitive or behavioral. I am sympathetic to taking consciousness seriously. I am strongly inclined to think that I am conscious as I write this review, and to infer that consciousness exists. I shall suggest, however, that in the end Chalmers' dogmatic scientism forces him *not* to take consciousness seriously.

Chalmers offers a variety of arguments for the second main premise of his argument, the thesis that consciousness provides an exception to the

otherwise seamless web of physical law. The core of the argument, however, can be found in his insistence on the possibility of zombies, beings just like ourselves except that they lack all consciousness. A zombie is “physically identical to me...[but]...all is dark inside” (p.96). Chalmers finds the possibility of such a being obvious. To understand this idea better we should note the absolute distinction Chalmers insists on between the cognitive and the phenomenal. The cognitive is the part of the mind that receives inputs, processes information, and directs behavioural outputs. The phenomenal is something that accompanies all this: what it feels like to perceive, think, etc., or even just “what it is like to be” the being that one is. The cognitive is, according to Chalmers, simply part of the physical causal web. What Chalmers finds obvious is that these physical processes could carry on quite happily without feeling like anything. Such would be the lot of a zombie. A consequence of all this is that the phenomenal gloss on the real workings of the mind is explanatorily irrelevant to what people do; this is something revealed by “the very conceivability of zombies” (p.156). Chalmers is not quite willing to call this epiphenomenalism, on the basis of some recondite worries about causality; but clearly the distance from epiphenomenalism is slight.

I must confess that the possibility of zombies does not strike me as at all obvious. One obvious difficulty is that my hypothetical zombie would constantly be speaking falsely in situations where I would be telling the truth. When I claim to feel love or remorse, to have had a vivid dream or to hear a singing in my ears, my zombie will, of course, claim the same thing. But of course his claims will be false, since these are not the sorts of things he ever has. Presumably he will falsely believe that he experiences love, dreams, etc., as he is cognitively identical to me, and I believe these things. This leads to a more substantial difficulty with the idea. If zombies are possible, how do I know I am not one? Chalmers claims to know that he has conscious experiences, but admits that his zombie would also claim to know this. Either Chalmers is in the same cognitive state as his zombie with regard to the question whether he has experiences or he is not. If he is not, then surely he is not cognitively indistinguishable from his zombie, which contradicts the original definition of a zombie. But if he is, then he has no way of knowing whether he is a zombie or not. Part of the problem is that one of the central premises of Chalmers’ book is a cognition—the belief that he is conscious—derived from experience. If the experience has no causal or even explanatory bearing on the cognition, then it is unclear why the cognition should be taken seriously.

The way out of this mess is to deny the causal inertness of experience. This is where I want to suggest that for all his insistence on taking consciousness seriously, Chalmers does nothing of the sort. Why did Othello kill Desdemona? Out of his jealousy, which is, amongst other things, an intense feeling. The suggestion that the internal torments of jealousy are explanatorily irrelevant to Othello’s actions seems, on the face of it, ludicrous. Of course there is no mystery about how Chalmers is led to this *prima facie* absurdity. It is through the idea that everything physical—the contortions of Othello’s face, his cries of anger, the movement of his hand with the knife, and so on—is fully and exhaustively explicable by appeal

solely to the laws of physics. But if I am right that no such belief is entailed by the commitment to “take science seriously” then it is possible, unlike Chalmers, to take consciousness seriously after all.

At any rate, being stuck with these phenomena of consciousness stubbornly resistant to capture within the physicists’ nomological net, Chalmers settles for a variety of dualism. He doesn’t want to place them outside the nomological net altogether, however, so he proposes a set of psychophysical laws in addition to the physical laws, laws that determine what kinds of experience accompany what kinds of physical systems. In view of such laws it turns out that zombies, while conceivable, are not nomologically possible. This position is referred to as Naturalistic Dualism.

There is surely something ontologically unaesthetic about dualism. It is at least an elegant picture that there should be only one kind of thing, and it is, to some people, plausible that there should be some fairly large and thoroughly contingent number of kinds of things. But dualism seems too like monism manqué, and certainly nowhere near a serious acceptance of pluralism. In later parts of the book, Chalmers, who certainly has no pluralistic leanings, can be seen hankering after something closer to monism. Failing monism, some ontological elegance could be acquired by proposing a symmetry between the two aspects of existence admitted by dualism. Chalmers follows such a path with the suggestion that experience may be a universal concomitant of information; and since information is everywhere, so will be experience. So rather than seeing experience as an anomalous excrescence peculiar to very complex and unusual parts of physical reality, he suggests that it may be a universal aspect of physical reality. While, for example, it may be very boring to be a thermostat (p. 293) it might be different only in degree from being you or I. At any rate, though I do find panpsychism extraordinarily implausible, I won’t try to explain what I take to be wrong with it. Fortunately, since I am wholly unpersuaded by the premises that lead Chalmers to this unlikely destination, I don’t feel an obligation to do so.

I have focused in this review on the central themes in Chalmers book, and themes on which I wholly disagree with him. I should reiterate that this is a densely and often elegantly argued book. There is certainly much more in it than I have touched on, and there will be ideas that will stimulate most readers. On the other hand, as indicated at the outset, I find the main premises vastly less plausible than the falsity of the conclusions (indeed I find the falsity of both premises and conclusions overwhelmingly plausible). Consequently I am inclined to read the book as a large scale *reductio ad absurdum*. However, there are certainly many contemporary philosophers who accept the main premises—perhaps even a majority of contemporary philosophers. Since philosophers who accept Chalmers apocalyptic vision of physics do not generally want to be led into dualism, they will have the perhaps quite challenging task of deciding where Chalmers goes wrong on the path from one to the other. So even though I do not take it to assert many truths, I think that there are many reasons why philosophers of varying inclinations might want to read this book.

NOTES

1. I attempt to develop the case against the reductionist position in detail in my book *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

2. I must confess, in passing, that I am not at all sure what it is like to be me. Not, of course, because I happen to be ignorant on this point, but because I doubt whether the expression "what it is like to be me" makes any sense.

God and Contemporary Science, by **Philip Clayton**. Eerdmans Pub. Co./Edinburgh University Press, 1997. Pp.xii and 274. \$25.

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This book is one in the series *Edinburgh Studies in Constructive Theology* which seeks to "[return] to the central themes of systematic theology, relating past thought to areas of contemporary concern in a way that is both faithful and creative." The volume under review, by Philip Clayton, a philosophy professor at Sonoma State University and one of the series editors, is a creative mix of theological, philosophical, and scientific thinking.

The work is primarily theological in orientation, starting from (Christian) theological premises and often appealing to faith and to the Bible as authoritative. The aim of the book is to develop an account of divine agency. But there is also a serious attempt to approach the subject philosophically, to construct an account that meets general standards of rationality and that has some grounding in what Clayton calls "universal argument". In addition, philosophy contributes to the formulation and defense of the *panentheistic* model of the divine nature that Clayton proposes in this work. Finally, and most importantly, the author attempts to defend theological beliefs in a way that takes science seriously and accommodates as far as possible current theory and "scientific conclusions".

The debate with science is carried on on two fronts: first, Clayton tries to show how God's actions can be viewed as compatible with contemporary theory in the physical sciences and (to a lesser extent) cosmology. The question he asks is: how can God perform special acts within the natural realm without violating the well-confirmed laws of physics? And second, in the final chapter of the book, Clayton enters into the current debate in cognitive science over the nature of the human mind and its relation to the body and brain. He seeks to resolve the question of how conscious thoughts and intentions are connected to the physical world and to the brain as a way of throwing light on God's relation to the world.

There are many suggestive ideas and authors' views discussed in this book that relate to the meeting-ground between theology and science. I have selected for consideration several topics that received the most sustained treatment and argumentation. First, I will evaluate Clayton's constructive proposal of a panentheistic view of God, and then turn to how he engages with science on each of the two fronts mentioned above. My criticism will be philosophical and not theological; that is, I will not attempt to