

Levine, Joseph, *Purple Haze: The Puzzle of Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) pp. 204, £22.50 (cloth).

The aim of this book is to defend ‘explanatory gap’, Levine’s own influential notion in the philosophical studies of phenomenal consciousness. The entire book proves how clear and systematic are Levine’s arguments in dealing with even as highly intractable an issue as the mystery of consciousness.

The mind-body problem in a contemporary guise is rooted in two *prima facie* plausible but incompatible propositions that philosophers have reached:

- (1) Some form of materialism or physicalism is true.
- (2) Phenomenal consciousness, raw feel, or qualia cannot be explained physicalistically.

The traditional strategy for solving the problem is simply to reject one or the other of these propositions. Thus some philosophers reject (1) and become dualists accordingly, and others reject (2) and become materialists accordingly. Levine, however, ventures to accept both of them at the same time. That is, while he defends materialism he also believes that we can never make *a priori* derivations from physical facts to phenomenal facts.

Chapter 1 of the book is devoted to establishing (1). In order to define his materialism Levine reflects nested dilemmas that materialism in general confronts. The dilemmas go as follows: The definition of ‘physical’ has either an *a priori* or an *a posteriori* source. The former cannot be true because if that is the case then physical science will be excluded from materialism. If the latter is the case, however, it falls into ‘Hempel’s dilemma’, according to which materialism is either trivial or false. Hempel

famously claimed that if the physical was defined by relying on contemporary physics then materialism would clearly be false. The reason is simply that, as anyone agrees, current physics is still incomplete. On the other hand if the physical was defined by appealing to future physics, Hempel continued, then materialism would be a trivial philosophical position based on what we have not yet seen. Levine resolves the dilemmas by arguing that we do not need a clear conception of the physical, because what we need in fact is 'a clear, or even not-so-clear, conception of the mental' (p. 20). Thus he accepts a form of materialism which is embodied in the thesis M' as follows:

M': Only non-mental properties are instantiated in a basic way; all mental properties are instantiated by being realized by the instantiation of other, non-mental properties. (p. 21)

Suppose that qualitative property Q is realised by the instantiation of physical property P in this world. Then if M' is true there is not a possible world in which P is instantiated but Q is not. According to the 'conceivability argument', however, there *is* such a world. The argument asserts that a zombie, a molecular duplicate of a conscious human being who lacks phenomenal experiences, is conceivable (or conceptually possible, in Levine's terminology). If a zombie is conceivable then it is metaphysically possible for it to exist because the conceivability of one thing entails its metaphysical possibility. If the existence of a zombie is metaphysically possible then it follows that the connection between P and Q is only nomological necessity. Therefore, it is concluded that the materialism imbedded in M' is false. Levine spends the whole of Chapter 2 in defending his materialism from this argument. While some materialists do not accept the conceivability of a zombie in the first place Levine is ready to grant it. He denies, however, the entailment from the conceivability of a zombie to its metaphysical

possibility. As a ‘non-exceptionalist’, Levine does two things. First, he rejects a general semantic framework, developed by anti-materialists, which purports to show that metaphysical consequences do follow from conceivability. Second, he shows that there is nothing special about a concept of qualia compared with other concepts. Consequently he adopts ‘non-ascriptivism’, which negatively answers the following question: ‘[F]or most terms, do we have *a priori* access to sufficient information to determine their referent given a context ... ?’ (p. 53). He concludes, therefore, ‘[f]rom the fact that the phenomenal facts are not derivable *a priori* from the physical facts it does not follow that the phenomenal facts are not realized by the physical facts’ (p. 68).

After disarming the anti-materialist force of the conceivability argument Levine tries to establish (2) — the claim that phenomenal consciousness, raw feel or qualia cannot be explained physicalistically — in Chapter 3. He contends that ‘there are good reasons for thinking that, unlike other macro domains, when it comes to qualia, we are not lacking merely enough detail to provide the requisite explanation, but any idea of how such a theory might go’ (p. 69). In addition to the conceivability argument, Levine examines Frank Jackson’s ‘knowledge argument’ as one of the major arguments that demonstrate the explanatory gap between physical properties and qualitative properties. Although Levine does not accept Jackson’s anti-materialist conclusion, he does derive an epistemic conclusion from the knowledge argument: ‘The fact that it seems so clear that ... [Mary, the protagonist of Jackson’s thought experiment,] would learn what it’s like to experience red is testimony to the explanatory gap that separates physical theory and conscious experience’ (p. 77). I believe that Levine’s response to the knowledge argument is subject to at least two kinds of objections. First, it is not as obvious as Levine assumes that Mary, who knows *everything* about the physical, would really learn

something new upon her release. In fact there have been several attempts to reject this assumption (e.g. Churchland, Paul M. 'Reduction, Qualia, and the Direct Introspection of Brain States', *Journal of Philosophy* 82, 1985; Dennett, Daniel C. *Consciousness Explained* 1991). Second, there are a number of objections brought up against Levine's way of undermining premises of the knowledge argument. (e.g. Chalmers, David J. *The Conscious Mind* 1996; Stoljar, Daniel 'Physicalism and the Necessary *A Posteriori*' *Journal of Philosophy* XCVII, 2000). Levine says 'For the same reasons I do not accept the conceivability argument, I do not accept the knowledge argument' (p. 77), but the knowledge argument is obviously quite distinct from the conceivability argument.

If Levine's explanatory gap were merely apparent then there would be several possible ways for materialists to overcome the gap. They might be able to show that the gap is filled because phenomenal consciousness is to be reductively explained. Or they might be able to demonstrate that the gap is illusion because phenomenal experience is to be eliminated from their ontology. In Chapter 4 and 5 Levine tries to refute those attempts. As a consequence he is committed to the 'modest qualophile' which says that, although there are good reasons to hold materialism, 'no materialist theory seems to really explain our experience, to make intelligible how a system satisfying the materialist's description could be a subject of conscious experience' (p. 128). Finally in Chapter 6 Levine closes his exploration of the puzzle of consciousness by analyzing the 'replacement argument' and 'zombie epistemology argument', both of which have arisen from the recent debate on consciousness and cognition.

One weakness that I find in the book is Levine's over-dependence on the conceivability argument. On the one hand I think that Levine's notion of the explanatory gap is extremely compelling and that it is at least very difficult for

materialists to provide a fully acceptable solution that bridges the gap. But on the other hand I worry that readers might have a false impression that Levine's concept of the explanatory gap is almost solely derived from the highly controversial conceivability argument. For although Levine examines other challenges to materialism, his discussion of them is significantly briefer than that of the conceivability argument. I nevertheless recommend the book to anyone who is interested in the problem of consciousness. Though the recent popularity of consciousness studies has produced an increase in books on the topic, I find few more provocative and well-written than Levine's *Purple Haze*.

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