

Inflate and Explode

Eric Schwitzgebel
Department of Philosophy
University of California, Riverside
Riverside, CA 92521-0201
USA

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Abstract: Inflate-and-explode arguments appeal to an illegitimately inflated conception of a type of entity in order to deny the existence of entities of that type. Eliminativist and illusionist arguments against consciousness generally commit that error. They inflate the concept of consciousness by illegitimately asserting that the existence of consciousness requires that consciousness have some dubious property like indubitability or irreducibility.

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1. Introduction.

Here's a way to deny the existence of things of Type X. Assume that things of Type X must have Property A, and then argue that nothing has Property A. Sometimes this is a good argumentative approach. Ghosts must be immaterial. Nothing is immaterial. Therefore, there are no ghosts.

Other times, the background assumption is false: Things of Type X in fact need not have Property A. The argument then fails: It illegitimately relies on an inflated or distorted conception of things of Type X. Real heroes must be ethically flawless. No one is ethically flawless. Therefore, there are no real heroes. Such arguments I pejoratively dub *inflate-and-explode* arguments. They explode not things of Type X but only an inflated conception of those things.

Eliminativism or “illusionism” about consciousness – recently defended by Jay Garfield (2015), Keith Frankish (2016a), and François Kammerer (2019) among others – generally relies on the inflate-and-explode argumentative strategy, as I will now explain.

2. Inflate-and-Explode Eliminativism.

Paul Feyerabend (1963) denies that mental processes exist. He does so on the grounds that “mental processes”, understood in the ordinary sense, are necessarily nonmaterial, and only material things exist. Patricia Churchland (1983) argues that the concept of consciousness may “fall apart” or be rendered obsolete, or at least require “transmutation”, because the idea of consciousness is deeply, perhaps inseparably, connected with false empirical views about the transparency of our mental lives and the centrality of linguistic expression. Daniel Dennett

(1991) argues that “qualia” do not exist, on the grounds that qualia are supposed by their nature to be ineffable and irreducible to scientifically discoverable mental mechanisms, and there is no good reason to believe that there are such ineffable, irreducible mental entities. Garfield (2015) denies the existence of phenomenal consciousness on the broadly Buddhist grounds that there is no “subject” of experience of the sort required and that we lack the kind of infallibility that friends of phenomenal consciousness assume. Frankish (2016a) argues that phenomenal consciousness is an “illusion” because there are no phenomenal properties that are “private” in the requisite sense, or ineffable, or irreducible to physical or functional processes. Kammerer (2019) likewise appeals to the non-existence of states with the right kind of irreducibility and other special epistemic features.

The arguments share a common structure. The target concept – “consciousness”, “phenomenal consciousness”, “qualia”, “what it’s like” – is held to involve some dubious property, such as immateriality, infallibility, or irreducibility. The eliminativist argues plausibly that nothing possesses that dubious property. The conclusion is drawn: Consciousness, etc., does not exist. The arguments are sound only if nothing that lacks the dubious property satisfies the target concept.

3. How Consciousness Enthusiasts Invite Inflation.

Unfortunately, enthusiasts about consciousness tend to set themselves up for objections of this sort. Consciousness enthusiasts tend to want to do two things simultaneously: (1.) They want to use the word “consciousness” (or “phenomenology” or “qualia” or “what it’s like” or whatever) to refer to that undeniable stream of experience that we all have. (2.) In characterizing that stream of conscious experience, or for the sake of some other philosophical project, they

make dubious assertions about its nature. They might claim that we know it infallibly well, or that it forms the basis of our understanding of the outside world, or that it's irreducible to merely functional or physical processes, or....

If those additional claims were demonstrably correct, the double purpose would be approximately harmless. However, such claims are not demonstrably correct. In committing to both projects simultaneously, consciousness enthusiasts thereby invite critics to think that the dubious claims they advance in project (2) are essential to the existence of consciousness ("phenomenology", "qualia", "what it's like") in the intended sense. It's like saying, in the same breath, "of course there are real heroes" (of which you are morally certain) and "real heroes are ethically flawless" (a theory you favor). A listener could be forgiven for mistakenly thinking that they have refuted your first claim if they can show that no one is ethically flawless.

For instance, Thomas Nagel (1974) believes that there's "something it's like" to be you, and also that this something-it's-like cannot be fully understood by objective sciences like physics. Earlier philosophers often committed to indubitability or substance dualism. John Searle (1992), Ned Block (1995/2007), and David Chalmers (1996) emphasize the importance of (phenomenal) consciousness and also commit to the inadequacy of functionalist explanations of it. The most famous recent articulators of the philosophical concept of phenomenal consciousness all commit to dubious claims about it – as philosophers will.

3. Resisting Inflation.

However – and this is the key – there is no consensus about those dubious claims among Anglophone philosophers of mind who use the terms "consciousness", "phenomenal

consciousness”, and “what it’s like”.¹ (“Qualia” is a harder case.) Because these terms are shared terms, they are not controlled by the minority who would attach dubious conditions to them. “Consciousness” is, and should be, understood in terms of shared community norms of use or meaning. The community norms do not essentially require indubitability, irreducibility, etc. Instead, “consciousness”, “phenomenal consciousness”, “what it’s like”, “stream of experience”, and (maybe) “qualia” all point to something that everyone (virtually everyone?) agrees exists: the types of things or events that you almost certainly think of when someone utters the phrase “conscious experiences”.

The best definitions of consciousness are definitions by example. At the core of, for instance, Searle’s (1991), Block’s (1995), Chalmers’s (1996), Charles Siewert’s (1998), and recently my own (Schwitzgebel 2016) definitions of (phenomenal) consciousness are *examples* of conscious experiences: visual and auditory experiences, emotions, acute pains, vivid imagery. If you agree that such things exist, and if you agree they have a certain obvious and important property in common that other things lack – it is, I think, a very obvious property! – then you agree that consciousness in the intended sense exists. Since definitions by example can seem to lack rigor (and are subject to certain other risks I discuss in Schwitzgebel 2016), it might be tempting to supplement minimalist definitions by example. It might be tempting, for instance, to suggest that the target phenomena in question all have an irreducible subjectivity (or whatever). Such supplementation is philosophically risky. If it’s manifestly true that all conscious experiences have an irreducible subjectivity (or whatever), then this can be a helpful

¹ For some recent discussion, see Chalmers’s (2018) on “weak illusionism” and Type B materialism.

specification. But such supplementary assertions risk confusing the reader and inflating the target if they are built into the definition rather than offered as separate, non-definitional theses.

We know some examples of consciousness. We know that these examples have an obvious and important property in common, which we dub (it only *seems* circular) “consciousness” or “phenomenality”. There is not much reasonable doubt about the existence of such examples or the fact that they have this property in common. **Definition by example is a relatively safe and theoretically innocent way of characterizing consciousness**; it blocks the inflate-and-explode maneuver; and it picks out the consensus target phenomenon that philosophers of mind are after when we talk about consciousness.²

I finish with a conjecture, which might not be true but which if true strengthens my argument: Non-eliminativist philosophers who commit to dubious claims about consciousness are in general much more deeply committed to the existence of consciousness than they are to the truth of those dubious claims. If required to abandon such dubious claims by force of argument, they would still accept the existence of consciousness. Their dubious claims aren’t ineliminably, foundationally important to their conception of consciousness. It’s not like the relation between magical powers and witches on some medieval European conceptions of witches, such that if magical powers were shown not to exist, the right conclusion would be that

² I have suggested to Frankish (Schwitzgebel 2016) and Garfield (Schwitzgebel 2018) that the existence of phenomenal consciousness might be saved if it is defined in this relatively innocent way. Frankish accepts that such definition by example helpfully identifies a “neutral explanandum” that does exist, but he also asserts that the definition is “not substantive” “in the substantive sense created by the phenomenality language game” (2016b, p. 227). It remains unclear, however, why such a definition by example is not substantive. In contrast, Garfield replies by, as I see it, doubling down on the inflation move, denying the existence of “qualitative states” “that are the objects of immediate awareness, the foundation of our empirical knowledge... that we introspect, with qualitative properties that are the properties of those states and not of the objects we perceive” (2018, p. 584).

witches do not exist. It's more like insisting that your heroes are still real heroes even if you are forced to abandon your theory of what makes someone a hero. It's like insisting that red things are still red even after your favorite theory of color is destroyed. Of course there are still heroes and colors.

4. Conclusion.

Almost all philosophers of mind have a conception of consciousness which rides free of the dubious claims that some of us make about consciousness, claims which are reasonably criticized by the eliminativists. We can remain confident that consciousness in this core, shared sense exists, even if indubitability, irreducibility, subjectivity, ineffability, ineliminable mystery, and so forth prove to be mistakes or illusions. The eliminativist arguments explode only an inflated conception of the target.

Perhaps similar remarks apply to some of the other things philosophers have grumpily or gleefully attempted to vanquish – not only heroes and colors but knowledge, causation, altruism, freedom, race, objectivity, chance, mind-independent reality, moral facts, the self...³

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