Unity of consciousness? Chalmers ch. 14

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Some different notions of "unity"

objectual unity (499): the states are "directed at the same object". There is a useful discussion of how this requires a solution for the "binding problem".

spatial unity (500): the states "represent objects as being part of the same space", that is "of being in spatial relations to one another"

subject unity (501): the states are "had by the same subject at the same time". Chalmers says this is trivial, true by definition, and tells us nothing substantive about consciousness. (He assumes there is nothing problematic in forming or identifying the set of all phenomenal states had by a particular conscious subject S at a particular time t.)

subsumptive unity (501): two phenomenal states A and B are subsumptively unified iff they are subsumed within a single state of consciousness.

A phenomenal state that subsumes all of one's phenomenal states at time t is a "single encompassing state of consciousness" that Chalmers calls a total conscious state (see also 509, top). "It can be thought of as involving at least a conjunction of each of the many more specific conscious states...However, what is important on this unity thesis is that this total state is not just a conjunction of conscious states but also a conscious state in its own right." (502)

The relation of subsumption is described as reflexive, antisymmetric, and transitive on p. 518.

If we can restrict ourselves to subjects who at time t have no phenomenal duplicates (no two phenomenal states of exactly the same phenomenal properties) and no phenomenal gestalts, subsumption is equivalent to "entailment" (necessary co-instantiation) on pp. 523-4.

The distinction between "access consciousness" and "phenomenal consciousness" (having experiences) yields two variants of each of objectual, spatial, and subsumptive unity (505)

two phenomenal states are subsumptively access unified if "the conjunction of their contents is available for verbal report, reasoning, and deliberate control of behavior" (506). Note that it is defined by accessibility of the contents of the states. Suppose conscious state A has content p and state B has content q. A and B will be jointly access conscious if "the information that p & q is available for report and control". (506)

two phenomenal states are subsumptively phenomenally unified if "they have a conjoint phenomenology: a phenomenology of having both states at once that subsumes the the phenomenology of the individual states... there is not just something it is like to have each state individually: there is something it is like to have A and B together." (508)
Conjoint phenomenology

It is useful to reserve the term *conjoint phenomenology* for the claim that over and above the phenomenal properties of A and the phenomenal properties of B, there are distinct phenomenal properties had when experiencing "A and B together". Conjoint phenomenology is alleged to be more than the conjunction of individual phenomenologies. Repeated in various places (besides 502 and 508):

> there is something it is like to see the book while feeling the pain. ... we can think of the conjoint state here as involving at least the conjunction $A & B$ of the original phenomenal states A and B. But importantly, the conjoint state is itself a phenomenal state: a single complex state of consciousness. (508)

Pairwise conjunctive unity thesis: For any two phenomenal states [A and B] of a subject at a time, their conjunction [a state C such that necessarily a subject is in state C if and only if that subject is in both state A and state B] is a phenomenal state. (p 526, bracketed bits added)

[The pairwise conjunctive unity thesis] says that for any two phenomenal states A and B of a subject at a time, there will be something distinctive that it is like to be in A and B: that is, a distinctive conjoint phenomenal character that a subject will have if and only if the subject is in both A and B. (526-27).

The problem this generates.

Assume the weakest variant of the phenomenal unity theses: that "Necessarily, any two phenomenal states of a subject at a time are phenomenally unified." (509). (In fact just assume that this is true, not that it is necessarily true.)

Assume that they are phenomenally unified by having a single state of consciousness that subsumes them both. I'll write this as "AB". It subsumes the phenomenal character of A and it subsumes the phenomenal character of B.

We can allow that the conjoint state AB subsumes its own phenomenal character, e.g. that "subsumption" is reflexive, as mentioned on p 518. The set of unified phenomenal states of subject S at time t would be \{A, B, AB\}. So far so good.

Now add the assumption that the conjoint phenomenology of AB is more than the conjunction of the phenomenologies of A and B. It adds a "distinctive" conjoint phenomenology C. Think \{A, B, ABC\}, where C is the distinctive character of the conjoint state that subsumes A and B (and itself).

The problem: not all the pairs of phenomenal states of the subject at time t are phenomenally unified. We need for example the pair A and ABC. Even though ABC subsumes A, and ABC subsumes C, if C is a distinctive phenomenal state then by pairwise phenomenal unity there is a distinctive phenomenology to having A and C together, and it's not in the set. Call that phenomenology D, so the state that subsumes the pair A and ABC will be A(ABC)D.

(One reply to this might be that the conjoint phenomenology ABC, which subsumes that of A and B and C, in fact already contains the phenomenology of the pairwise combination of A and C. But the problem is generated again by the claim that conjoint phenomenology is distinctive. Experiencing A and C together yields a "distinctive phenomenology" which is more than the conjunction (or the sum) of A and C. So it's not included in ABC, and introduces a new D.)

So we're off to the races. The progression would be:
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{A, B}
{A, B, ABC}
{A, B, ABC, A(ABC)D, B(ABC)E}

and so on.

If you just list the new "distinctive phenomenologies" for the pairs not yet included it would appear as:

{A, B}
{A, B, C} one new pair
{A, B, C, D, E} two new pairs
{A, B, C, D, E, F, ... L} seven new pairs
and so on.

There's no regress problem here. But the cardinality of this set is infinite. Once one contemplates infinite sets, I find no "strong intuition that the unity thesis is true" (533).

**How to avoid the problem:**

Drop the idea that there is a "distinctive conjoint phenomenology": that what it is like to experience "A and B together" is something over and above experiencing A and simultaneously experiencing B. The phenomenology of the state that subsumes both A and B is just the conjunction of the phenomenology of A and the phenomenology of B.

If subject S is in the state represented by {A, B} then S is in A and S is in B. If the subsuming state is just the conjunction of individual states, then adding it to the set won't add any new phenomenal properties that aren't already found in the conjuncts.

**Subsumption as equivalent to conjunction**

Suppose our subject S at time t is in just two phenomenal states: A and B. S is experiencing A and simultaneously experiencing B. If there is no added "conjont phenomenology", then this is equivalent to "experiencing A & B together". (The idea is that by conjoining all the "what it is like to be in this state" for each phenomenal state of subject S at time t, we get a "total" state that is equivalent to "what it is like to be subject S at time t". See 509)

One consequence: the total conscious state of S at t is represented by the set {A, B}. We don't have to add (A&B) to the set, because it wouldn't add any phenomenal properties not already present. (They already are "pairwise unified", because S is experiencing both of them simultaneously.)

**Subsumption as mereological (see 518)**

Unity falls out even more simply if "subsumes" just means "contains as a part". Suppose A subsumes B iff the phenomenal character of B is a mereological part of the phenomenal character of A. (It needn't be a proper part. So any phenomenal state A subsumes itself.) The sum of phenomenal states A and B will subsume both of them. And it will also subsume itself.
Next stipulate that the sum of any number of simultaneous phenomenal states is itself a phenomenal state. (This isn't unreasonable. You can even say it is a phenomenal state "in its own right", if you like.) Then "phenomenally subsumptive unity" will follow as a trivial consequence:

Subsumptive unity: For any set of phenomenal states of a subject at a time, the subject has a phenomenal state that subsumes each of the states in the set. (517).

Why? For any such set form the sum of its members. That sum is by stipulation a phenomenal state, and the subject is in it at time t. It subsumes all those members. And it is the "total conscious state" of S at time t.

The "entailment" and "logical unity" theses also fall out. Recall that for Chalmers a state P "entails" Q iff it is logically or metaphysically impossible to instantiate P without also instantiating Q. (p 519)

Logical unity thesis: For any set of phenomenal states of a subject at a time, the subject has a phenomenal state T such that it is logically or metaphysically impossible to instantiate T without also instantiating all the states in that set. (520, edited).

Suppose T is just the sum of all the states in the set. It is impossible to instantiate T without instantiating all its parts. But all those parts are just the states in the set.

Chalmers uses "conjunction" in section 6 to name a metaphysical relation: the "conjunction of a set of states is a state C such that necessarily, a subject is in C if and only if the subject is in each of the states in that set." (525). Q: is this in any way distinct from "mereological sum"?

We can also read the logical unity theses more naturally by replacing "entails" with "includes as parts":

Pairwise logical unity thesis: Necessarily, for any two phenomenal states had by a subject at a time, the subject has a phenomenal state that entails [includes as parts] both original states.

General logical unity thesis: Necessarily, for any set of phenomenal states had by a subject at a time, the subject has a phenomenal state that entails [includes as parts] each state in the set. (524)

The moral is that once you can form the set of all the phenomenal states of a subject at a time, you already have whatever "unity" there is in "phenomenally subsumptive unity". Perhaps "subject unity" for a dualist isn't quite the triviality that Chalmers thinks it is. Or perhaps none of these unity theses teach us anything "substantive" about consciousness.