

## **Review of D. Stoljar, *Ignorance and Imagination***

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Phenomenal consciousness presents a problem for the otherwise attractive idea that all the facts of the world are necessitated by the fundamental facts about matter. For there is something about phenomenal consciousness that makes it seem entirely independent of the physical realm; hence the problem of consciousness. The problem continues to vex partly because proposed solutions tend to dissatisfy – in one of two ways: dualist solutions give up on the attractive idea, thus rendering phenomenal consciousness ultimately mysterious, while materialist solutions fail to capture that which makes consciousness seem so special, thus rendering mysterious the fact that there is a problem with consciousness to begin with. The challenge is to devise a solution that would cast phenomenal facts as (a) indeed necessitated by physical facts, but (b) genuinely special, in a way that makes them seem not thus necessitated.

It is this challenge that Daniel Stoljar attempts to meet in this excellent – controlled, thorough, clear, methodical, original, and well-argued – book. As is his wont, Stoljar sets up the problem of consciousness (in Chapter 2) as a triad of independently plausible but not conjointly tenable propositions: there are phenomenal facts; if there are phenomenal facts, they are necessitated by physical facts; if there are phenomenal facts, they are not necessitated by physical facts. The first is supported by direct introspection; the second by the realizations that (a) apparently everything *else* is necessitated by the physical facts and (b) facts cited in the manifest image are generally necessitated by facts cited in the scientific image; the third is supported by certain modal arguments, in particular Chalmers' conceivability argument and Jackson's knowledge argument.

Stoljar's solution is to deny the third proposition (that if there are phenomenal facts, they are unnecessitated by physical facts) and offer a diagnosis of why that proposition might *seem* plausible. In a nutshell, what makes it seem plausible is that we are ignorant of a whole class of facts about matter. These unknown facts about matter, in combination with the known ones, do necessitate the phenomenal facts. But because (i) we are ignorant of them and (ii) the facts of which we are not ignorant do *not* by themselves necessitate the phenomenal facts, the phenomenal facts seem unnecessitated by the physical facts. Stoljar is keen to dissociate this general position from more specific versions potentially guilty of spook-mongering, in particular the views (a) that our ignorance is chronic and incontrovertible and (b) that the facts of which we are ignorant have to do with the delightful mysteries of the quantum wave collapse. Either of these may turn out to be the case, but the general position allows also for less glamorous eventualities, in which we happen to discover a previously unknown but otherwise quite ordinary

set of physical facts that, together with the familiar physical facts, necessitate the phenomenal facts.

Accordingly, the core of the book is dedicated to the development of a two-step argument. The first step (spanning Chapters 5-7) attempts to make it plausible that we are indeed ignorant of a whole class of physical facts – what Stoljar calls “the ignorance hypothesis.” The second step (Chapter 4) attempts to show that if the ignorance hypothesis is true, then the conceivability and knowledge arguments fail, leaving us with no reason to accept the proposition that if there are phenomenal facts, then they are not necessitated by physical facts. En route, Stoljar develops an impressive machinery with which to articulate with great precision his key claims; I cannot reproduce the machinery here, so let me summarize the argument in more familiar though also less precise terms.

The first phase of the argument adduces three non-demonstrative arguments for the ignorance hypothesis. The first is constituted by a collection of general reflections on our epistemic standing in the world (Chapter 5): as a natural, evolved system, there is no reason to expect the human intellect to understand all the facts about our universe or its physical makeup, let alone understand them *now*; furthermore, the tremendous philosophical and empirical difficulties surrounding consciousness make perfect sense if we suppose that they are all symptoms of the ignorance hypothesis. Another argument is a historical induction of sorts, noting that arguments due to Descartes and Broad, to the effects that intellectual and chemical facts (respectively) are not necessitated by physical facts, turned out later to be frustrated by hitherto unknown physical facts (Chapter 7). Perhaps the most philosophical of Stoljar’s three arguments is inspired by so-called Russellian monism (Chapter 6; see also Stoljar’s much discussed 2001 paper “Two Conceptions of the Physical”). The main idea is that physics can tell us only about the dispositional or relational properties of matter, but since dispositions ultimately require categorical properties as bases, and relations ultimately require intrinsic properties as relata, there must also be categorical or intrinsic properties about which physics is silent. Yet these are properties of *physical objects* and thus are physical properties in one central sense. Instantiations of such properties would therefore constitute physical facts of which we are ignorant, as per the ignorance hypothesis.

The second phase of the argument shows that if we are ignorant of a certain class of facts about matter, then the conceivability and knowledge arguments fail. Indeed, as modal arguments, they fail in ways modal arguments standardly do: although it is not *ideally* conceivable, but only *prima facie* conceivable, that the phenomenal facts should be different despite the physical facts being the same, we are tempted to think that it *is* ideally conceivable by confusing this state of affairs with another, genuinely ideally conceivable one, namely, where the phenomenal facts are different despite the *known* physical facts being the same (i.e., variation in the phenomenal facts without variation in the physical facts of which we are not ignorant). Stoljar illustrates this confusion with a pair of illuminating (and

entertaining) allegories about creatures *stipulated* to be in a state of crucial ignorance. (Oddly, he neglects to state explicitly that which is allegorized, but at least this reader enjoyed the exercise.) The result, in any case, is a theoretically compelling and after all pre-theoretically rather intuitive explanation of why the phenomenal facts *seem* not necessitated by the physical facts – even though they are.

Other tasks undertaken in the book include the identification of the conception of consciousness that sustains the problem of consciousness (Chapter 1), argumentation against various attempts to debunk the problem (Chapter 3), and argumentation for the superiority of the epistemic solution over competing solutions (Chapters 10-12). Let me close with two critical ruminations and a compliment.

The first concerns the Russellian argument for the ignorance hypothesis. It seems to me that, notwithstanding Stoljar's contrary assertions (in §6.3.2), the Russellian argument is not entirely neutral on whether the ignorance is chronic or provisional. Since our ignorance of the categorical or intrinsic properties of matter has nothing to do with the particular subject matters or techniques we have taken up to-date, but rather issues somehow from the very nature of scientific inquiry, it would seem very much chronic and incontrovertible. Thus the Russellian argument supports ignorance only in its chronic version. Although the dialectical situation here is delicate, arguably insofar as we find chronic ignorance unappealing and worth dissociating from, an argument that supports the ignorance hypothesis only in its chronic version should strike us as equally unappealing.

A more basic issue concerns the deep motivation for the epistemic solution, and whether it meets the challenge I formulated in the opening paragraph. As noted, the idea that phenomenal facts are necessitated by physical facts, but seem not to because we are ignorant of a certain type of physical fact, is in some ways very natural. One feature of it that gives me pause is the fact that it does not diagnose the problem of consciousness in terms of any peculiarity of consciousness itself. For the proponent of the epistemic view, what generates the problem of consciousness is not some special aspect of *consciousness*, but some special aspect of *matter*. In fact, it seems that on the epistemic view it is a sheer accident that the unknown physical facts are needed to necessitate consciousness but not zebrahood; if the unknown physical facts happened to be different, we might have a "problem of zebras" on our hands and no problem of consciousness. This seems to me wrongheaded. Like others, I am much more tempted by the thought that the problem of consciousness has its source in some special feature of consciousness. In particular, it seems to me that the problem cannot be altogether unconnected to the fact that we have an elusively special access to our own stream of consciousness, a kind of access we have to nothing else (and nothing else has to us). But for the epistemic view this fact plays no role in making phenomenal facts seem unnecessitated by physical facts, and the problem of consciousness would arise regardless of whether we had any special access to phenomenal consciousness, indeed regardless of whether

phenomenal consciousness was in any way special. If the challenge is, as I claim, to devise a solution to the problem of consciousness that would cast phenomenal facts as ultimately necessitated by physical facts but also as nonetheless special, it is unclear how the epistemic solution might meet it.

Although for the reasons just sketched I personally remain skeptical, Stoljar's book makes a fresh and invaluable contribution to the literature on consciousness. To articulate so crisply such a theoretically original yet pre-theoretically natural position; to argue for it so comprehensively and so agilely, and moreover in a way that clarifies tremendously the logical structure of the issues involved; to address the relevant considerations and alternative options so thoroughly and so relentlessly, amounts in the end to an intellectual achievement of the first magnitude. Most of all, it is a testament to the book's force that by the time one is finished with it, one finds it astonishing that its central thesis had never been seriously defended before. To my mind, with the publication of this book the epistemic view has earned its place among the handful of leading options for handling the problem of consciousness.