Emergentism About Phenomenal Consciousness

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What is Qualia Emergentism?

Physicalists (e.g., Kim, 1999, Phil Stud) seem to accept emergentism about qualia (phenomenal properties). I find this endorsement ad hoc, trivial, and incoherent.

Qualia emergentism is exclusive or narrow and pre-empts a general enquiry into the plausibility and coherence of emergence.

Qualia Emergentism is ad hoc

1 Qualia pose a unique problem for a complete physicalism (esp. reductive physicalism).
2 Dualism is not an option.
3 But emergentism about qualia possibly is.

1 Qualia emergentism is informative only if there is a unified understanding, or a general theory, of emergence.
2 There is no one theory of emergence to date.
3 Hence, qualia emergentism is uninformative.

Qualia Emergentism is Trivial

It has become mainstream to define emergence exclusively in terms of irreducibility. This makes qualia emergentism trivial:

1 P is emergent iff P is not reducible.
2 Phenomenal properties are not reducible.
3 Hence, phenomenal properties are emergent.

Qualia Emergentism is Incoherent

1 Physicalism accepts (implies) Completeness/Closure/Exclusion Principles.
2 Emergentism rejects these Principles.
3 Hence, physicalism is true iff emergentism is false; they are not compatible.
4 Qualia emergentism is a kind of emergentism.
5 Therefore, physicalism both accepts and rejects Completeness/Closure/Exclusion Principles.

Commentary/Background

Emergentism thrived between 1910 and 1930, and is back since the 1990s (not least) because of fading enthusiasm for supervenience. Classical emergentism deserves serious re-consideration.

Two main features of an emergent property P:
1 Dependence: P has complex instantiation conditions on which it ontologically depends.
2 Distinctiveness: P is a genuinely new entity; this is a cluster of ideas including unpredictability and irreducibility with the main component novelty.

Qualia are either reducible to physical properties or fundamental properties. If the latter, they are either basic physical properties or basic mental properties. Neither option appeals to physicalists. Emergentism seems ‘naturalist’ enough and hence acceptable; it is supposed to bring qualia within the realm of physicalism.

There is no unified understanding of emergence so far, and its clarification is locked in the debate about reduction and anti-reduction. Due to little theoretical progress, the notion remains vague and versatile. Physicalists with emergentist inclinations exploit this fact. But qualia emergentism is not an explanatory theory; it is a position that ‘fondly covers a difficulty with a blessed word’ (Morris, 1926, Proc Arist Soc).

Still, it is possible that emergentism about phenomenal properties follows from a more general theory of emergence.

Phenomenal properties resist functional reduction:
1 Reduction of P only if P is functionalisable (re-definable extrinsically in terms of its causal role).
2 Qualia are not functionalisable (they are intrinsic).
3 Hence qualia are not reducible (cf. Kim, op. cit.)

Functionalisation and the role of conceptual analysis is much debated in current physicalism.

Rather than a definiens, P’s irreducibility may be the consequence of an alternative definition of emergence (in terms of novelty or the individuation of kinds) informed by classical emergentism.

The central claim of physicalism, crudely, is that all entities are nothing over and above physical entities.

Two principles ensure this:
1 Causal Completeness: There are no non-physical causes.
2 Explanatory Completeness: physical explanations give full coverage (i.e. explain all facts or phenomena).

Possibly, qualia emergentism is coherent for physicalism if we distinguish between epistemic and ontic forms of emergentism. Epistemic emergence indicates a (temporary) deficit in our cognitive grasp of a phenomenon.

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