

UNITED WISDOM

Why subjective experience exists: the hard problem of consciousness

World and Consciousness

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

W11 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Why subjective experience exists: the hard problem of consciousness

Epigraph

> *“One cannot conclude from my version of the argument that materialism is false”. — Joseph Levine, Materialism and Qualia: The Explanatory Gap, 1983, p. 354; sentence fragment from the English original. The author preserves an explanatory difficulty while distinguishing it from metaphysical refutation.*

What this article is about

We can describe how a system distinguishes a sound, retains information, and prepares an answer, then ask why any of this is experienced. The difference between questions gives the hard problem of consciousness its interest. It neither makes brain research pointless nor proves an immaterial theory. This article examines the explanatory gap: the passage from mechanisms and functions to experience's subjective character. Selected primary texts by Levine and Chalmers specify a demand on explanation; Nagel clarifies the role of a point of view, while James shows why a disputed word needs definite content. Their arguments remain philosophical positions rather than a combined scientific verdict. An invented listener illustrates an explanation achieved, an additional assumption, and an unanswered question. Our practical aim is closer reading of consciousness arguments, without turning personal experience or incomplete knowledge into proof of the world's ultimate constitution.

I. Identify the subject before explaining it

Imagine a listener hearing a short sound and calling it high. This is an invented situation, not an auditory finding. Several questions arise: which sound occurred, how the answer was produced, and how the listener experienced it. An answer about frequency would concern a physical event; explaining word selection would concern an action; describing experience would concern how the event was present to someone. These subjects connect in our scene without making their statements interchangeable. If an explanation promised to account for an answer's production, assess that promise. If it promised to explain experience's existence, identify where the further transition receives grounds, rather than assuming that a detailed description automatically fulfils both commitments.

Subjective experience here means a state's experienced character: something has a particular appearance or feel for the subject. This working definition serves a philosophical question,

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

rather than supplying a measuring scale or a complete vocabulary of conscious states. It assumes no infallibility of personal reports. Experience's presence, its description, and an inference about its cause can be distinguished. Our listener can call the sound sharp without explaining the entire hearing procedure. Their description receives a particular role. A further theoretical move needs its own grounds, which cannot follow solely from strong personal confidence or a familiar word. The report can remain meaningful without already containing the answer to every question connected with it.

A misplaced subject creates the appearance of a quick solution. If experience is silently replaced by the capacity to name a stimulus, a detailed account of naming can appear final. Conversely, dismissing mechanisms because experience seems mysterious discards useful work without assessment. Begin by recording what must be explained and what would count as answering that question. This is no universal examination imposed on every philosophical system. It preserves a particular argument's commitment. The subject can later be refined, but the change should be disclosed. Otherwise readers lose sight of where the initial task ended and where a different task began, while the same general term makes both appear to be one undertaking.

II. Easy problems need not involve easy work

In his 1995 paper, Chalmers distinguishes explaining cognitive functions from the problem of experience. The former includes discrimination, access to information, and reportability. Easy is relative in his account: detailed empirical investigation remains difficult and unfinished. This is his formulation, rather than our assertion that every mechanism is known. The qualification matters because the striking easy–hard pairing can become a judgment of researchers' effort. It distinguishes explanatory tasks. Identifying a route toward a mechanism does not mean that all steps have been completed or a final result obtained. We retain the difference between a proposed way of answering and an answer that has actually been worked out.

Suppose our fictional scene includes a good explanation of selecting the high-sound answer. It describes the information distinguished, its role in subsequent processing, and why the word results. We claim no actual explanation has been obtained for this invented listener. The supposition reveals the next question's structure. Even if the functional task is fulfilled, a reader can ask whether the account also explains why the process accompanies experience. In Chalmers's argument, this is an additional subject. Accepting or disputing that formulation should be separated from assessing how well a particular model explains its promised answer-producing process. The first disagreement cannot substitute for the second assessment, or the second for the first.

Distinguishing tasks permits acknowledging bounded success without exaggeration or dismissal. A model can perform particular work without claiming to explain all experience;

assess its stated purpose. A broader promise requires broader grounds. This ordinary logic of reading explanations is our editorial application, rather than advance confirmation of a consciousness theory. There is no obligation to choose between everything is explained and nothing matters. We can say that a mechanism is understood, the experiential question is framed differently, and their connection remains under discussion. This result preserves useful work and its visible limits. It also leaves an intelligible next task instead of treating partial success as either complete victory or complete failure.

III. Levine distinguishes causal role from qualitative character

In the selected 1983 passage, Levine compares a state's causal role with its qualitative character. His historical pain and C-fiber example operates within a philosophical argument; we adopt no exhaustive contemporary account of pain from it. He asks why knowing a mechanism that explains a role should also make the feeling intelligible. At the outset he expressly limits the conclusion: his argument cannot establish materialism's falsity. The gap therefore cannot become a discovered proof of a separate immaterial entity. It demands an intelligible connection rather than determining everything that exists. Reading the example within that stated scope preserves the philosophical question without importing a historical formula as present medical or neuroscientific instruction.

Our listener preserves the question without borrowing a medical example. Suppose an explanation shows why they choose high. What work does a further statement about experienced sound perform? If it merely renames an action already described, disclose why renaming answers the additional question. If a connection between process and sensation is asserted, show its grounds. Adding experience appears marks the transition without explaining it. This does not prohibit a proposed theory. It permits asking what makes its passage more intelligible than the initial juxtaposition of two descriptions of one hypothetical case. A theory can then identify its contribution, instead of treating the reader's request as either immediate agreement or automatic rejection of the whole proposal.

Intelligibility itself needs discussion. Levine admits in the selected passage that without a theoretical account of the notion he cannot give a fully adequate answer. We retain that openness. A reader need not make dissatisfaction a universal truth criterion. One argument may seem clear and another require a step; identify the demand and why it is appropriate. Explanatory gap should not become a magical name for every difficulty. It identifies a passage and permits examining the standard of explanation itself. Otherwise a reader's current lack of understanding becomes the permanent limit of possible knowledge for everyone. Naming the standard opens a subject for argument rather than merely giving an impression greater authority through a technical phrase.

IV. An explanatory bridge must do some work

Chalmers's bridge image helps when its subject is restored. One side describes functions; the other asks about experienced character. Any attractive word inserted between them cannot automatically count as a bridge. Identify the proposition connecting the descriptions and its status. It may be a definition, theoretical principle, assumption, or conclusion from specified grounds. These options differ. We establish no uniquely permissible answer form here. We ask whether the transition does anything beyond repeating that a connection is needed. New terminology can help by making the connection precise; novelty alone cannot establish a completed explanation. What matters is the contribution made by the proposed step within the argument and the grounds supporting that contribution.

Imagine a diagram of our hypothetical explanation: sound discrimination, answer production, and experience inserted between those descriptions. If experience only labels the same process, ask why the label answers the additional question. If a correspondence rule is introduced, examine its conditions. If the rule is taken as basic, disclose where derivation ends and an adopted proposition begins. None of these moves is forbidden beforehand. Distinguishing them permits an honest result. We test no actual diagram or compute its quality; we show a question readers can ask about a transition before accepting that the promise is fulfilled. The illustration identifies an argumentative obligation without supplying the evidence that would settle it for a real theory.

Explanation need not derive everything from nothing. It can contain starting principles, concepts, and limits. Distinguish what is already adopted from what the argument was supposed to establish. A disputed proposition hidden at the beginning may simply return in different words at the end. For consciousness, this is editorial scrutiny of an argument, rather than a new experimental discovery. It preserves serious discussion: name a theory's commitments, examine what follows, and ask why those grounds should be accepted. An openly acknowledged principle is more informative than a concealed transition because disagreement gains an identifiable subject. The discussion can then concern the actual premise or inference rather than the general attractiveness of a preferred vocabulary.

V. Agreement, condition, and explanation serve different tasks

An invented table could place a process description beside the listener's report. Even matching rows leave a question about what agreement shows. Co-occurrence, proposed necessity, and proposed sufficiency are different assertions. We distinguish them logically, without reporting an unread neural experiment. Calling something necessary requires grounds for excluding the relevant case without it at a stated scale. Calling it sufficient requires grounds for the reverse direction. A single well-described episode fulfils neither obligation automatically. Our imaginary table discloses requirements without supplying real-world evidence that fulfils them. It helps locate the next inference, rather than granting every possible inference the authority of a record that was introduced only as an illustration.

Even an established condition may differ from the explanation a reader expects. A connection can be identified while its intelligibility remains disputed: does it explain experience's character or precisely relate it to another description? This distinction does not devalue establishing connections. Assessment depends on the stated aim. A study seeking a reliable indicator need not be blamed for failing to complete metaphysics it never promised. A theory promising experience's origin may need more than an indicator in its own explanatory sense. Match the demand to the promise and allow explicit disagreement about sufficiency. The result can remain substantive without being promoted into a solution to a different problem whose standard was never part of the original task.

Separate this supports a conclusion from this resolves the whole question. An additional assumption often lies between them. Our listener's account might support describing this sound as experienced sharply, without yielding a law for every possible system. A general thesis needs stated grounds for generalization. We determine no actual systems' possession of experience here. A human example neither tests machine consciousness nor proves its absence. It illustrates scope: what was established, for which cases, and in which respect? The wider the next inference, the more visible the supporting work should become. Otherwise one conditional scene can quietly acquire the force of a universal answer it was never designed or evidenced to provide.

VI. A gap in knowledge does not settle the world's constitution

I do not yet understand the connection concerns understanding; no such connection exists asserts something about the world. Moving between them requires additional grounds. Levine's distinction between epistemological and metaphysical tasks therefore matters. Here it prevents explanatory difficulty from automatically refuting a physical account or confirming another substance. The question can be serious while the ontological conclusion remains open. This is not necessarily indifference toward the debate. It means that justification of explanation and determination of what exists have not become one proof. Retaining those separate obligations allows a reader to discuss a genuine difficulty without treating uncertainty as evidence that a preferred alternative has already been established.

Conceivability also needs an assigned role. Someone can describe functions seemingly preserved without experience and use the scene to examine concepts. Coherent wording alone does not establish metaphysical possibility. In Levine's selected argument, possibility relative to knowledge is insufficient for metaphysical possibility. We undertake no full modal-logic analysis or comparison of every thought experiment. Preserve the inference's boundary: an imagined scene can reveal an assumption, while its further use requires justification. Otherwise an illustration becomes reality's proven constitution after beginning as a way to ask a question. Stating the role keeps the example available for philosophical work without giving it conclusions that have not been argued for within that work.

The opposite exaggeration assigns future knowledge the power to resolve every remainder automatically. Expecting progress can reasonably guide inquiry without replacing a missing argument. We estimate no discovery probability or final-solution deadline here. A concrete research hope can be stated alongside what still needs showing. This keeps the future open without promising its outcome. Mechanisms and concepts can be investigated together, without making one field wait for the other's completion. Uncertainty has a subject and scale. It need become neither an eternal prohibition on understanding nor an accomplished victory for one position. The next task remains possible precisely because the present claim acknowledges both what is understood and what has yet to receive grounds.

VII. Nagel keeps a point of view within the subject

In the selected pages, Nagel asks how experience connects with a point of view. His bat example distinguishes imagining ourselves behaving differently from asking about the bat's experience. It supplies no new animal measurements. Preserve his qualifications: partial understanding is allowed; the viewpoint is a type, rather than one individual's incommunicable property; experience is not equated with infallibility. His text cannot become a slogan forbidding all discussion of another's experience. It asks what must remain in a description so subjective character is not removed from the very subject promised explanation. This philosophical demand should be examined in its stated form rather than expanded into a universal finding about what human beings can never know.

Our fictional listener can describe sharpness ordinarily, while another person understands through an appropriate experiential similarity. This illustrates communication conditionally, without guaranteeing identical sensations. Partial understanding can be acknowledged without declaring two experiences wholly the same. Avoid both extremes: any difference makes communication impossible, or the same word proves complete identity. What matters here is that an external record and an experiential description may impose different requirements. A proposed translation between them needs conditions. Removing viewpoint from the question cannot itself count as explaining it. The article's scene identifies this requirement without proving whether a particular philosophical theory could meet it or specifying the actual similarity between real listeners.

Imagination's limit gives no authority to judge another experience's worth. We may fail to picture it fully while respecting the person's account. This is our ethical application, rather than a finding about everyone's neural structure. Philosophical uncertainty requires neither testing a conversation partner's experiential correctness nor compelling private disclosure. A neutral example and acknowledged partial description suffice for substantive discussion. The question remains open without turning another person into a mysterious object whose inner life must be proved to us through a convenient instruction. The scale of the inquiry can therefore stay philosophical while participation remains voluntary and the person's ordinary language retains a place in the conversation.

VIII. Announce a change in the concept

James's 1904 essay shows why consciousness needs reading alongside the subject of denial. He rejects a separate original entity while retaining thoughts and knowing; experiential contexts receive different roles. We do not call this a response to Levine or Chalmers's later arguments. It is a bounded comparison of question formation. Rejecting one meaning need not reject experience itself. Assess a position by identifying what is preserved and what is to be explained differently. The historical text remains a philosophical proposal. Moving a familiar term into today's debate cannot turn it into contemporary experimental proof. Its usefulness here lies in clarifying an assertion's subject, rather than settling a later controversy through historical authority.

In our scene's discussion, one speaker might use experience for heard sound and another for information available to a system. Each definition may be meaningful, but sufficiency becomes unclear until the difference is disclosed. Keep both formulations and identify the dispute. Rejecting the first subject's formulation needs an argument rather than a new label alone. Demanding additional explanation requires specifying its standard. An announced conceptual change permits real disagreement. Hidden substitution can produce apparent agreement while each speaker answers a different question throughout. Clarifying the terms does not ensure they will agree afterward; it allows the remaining disagreement to concern an actual premise, subject, or explanatory requirement rather than an unnoticed difference in word use.

Every frame must disclose its commitments. If experience is basic, state what that adoption explains. If it is redescribed, show what survives and why the sought subject is preserved. If functions suffice, justify sufficiency. We distribute no winners among these options. We disclose transitions each would need. Primary comparison helps because differences are retained rather than erased for a beautiful shared formula. Arguments can be read together with their distinct tasks intact. A bounded resemblance supplies neither complete compatibility of systems nor a final solution to the hard problem. Further comparison can remain an identifiable task instead of being silently claimed as complete merely because the sources appear beside one another.

IX. Read a theory's promise closely

Begin with three questions: what is explained, which step supplies grounds, and what remainder does the author acknowledge? This editorial reading method is no validated scientific assessment instrument. Answers may appear in an introduction or require the methods or argument. An unread passage cannot be reconstructed from a title. A link does not establish acquaintance with all data either. Our philosophical reading scopes are stated in the sources. We claim no comparison of the entire contemporary debate or verification of every empirical model. The limit lets readers see what supports the present conclusion. It also identifies where a wider task would require further actual reading rather than a more confident summary of material not examined.

Separate an author's thesis from your response to it. Convincingness does not specify the transition achieved; dissatisfaction likewise needs a definite question. Record that answer selection is understood, its connection to experienced character remains unclear, and the author proposes a particular linking principle. Further reading then acquires a subject. An entire system need not be judged immediately. Choose one step, locate its grounds, and examine what changes when it is introduced. This scale makes philosophical work concrete and permits changing one's mind through argument rather than only through an initial impression. A clear partial assessment can support the next investigation without claiming either complete comprehension or complete rejection of the theory being read.

Read proven, impossible, and complete especially carefully. They strengthen a proposition's commitment. Selected conditions cannot be expanded into every possible case; difficulty with present concepts cannot automatically become permanent impossibility. These are distinctions of inference scale here, rather than advance determination of the debate's winner. Real incompleteness can be noticed without inventing a final answer. A strong argument can be acknowledged with its premises visible. Clear commitments support disagreement without making readers choose a worldview from an attractive theory name or a memorable historical quotation. The source then remains something to examine, rather than an authority that ends inquiry merely because its language matches the position the reader already prefers.

X. An open question can be a precise result

In this formulation, the hard problem asks why functions accompany experienced life. The explanatory gap demands a passage without automatically introducing a second substance. Nagel preserves viewpoint; James reminds us to specify denial and redescription. These connections form no proven shared system. Selected primary passages distinguish subjects and promises; a wider comparison would require further reading. A sufficient result is possible here: identify the additional question, what is already under discussion, and the next grounds a chosen answer would need. Incompleteness is neither concealed nor made proof of a position. It becomes a visible part of the result, so readers can tell where the article's supported distinctions end and their next inquiry begins.

Continue from any clear step. One reader might refine experience's concept, another examine a model's functional explanation, another discuss intelligibility's standard. All tasks need not be completed simultaneously. Ordinary listening need not become a continuous test of one's capacity to exist or think. Philosophical interest measures neither worth, health, nor spiritual standing. It can widen question-language when wanted and yield to ordinary description when unnecessary. This freedom is an editorial condition of our practice. It does not settle consciousness's constitution, but preserves the human scale of discussing something immediately available to the experiencer. The invitation to understand remains optional rather than becoming a demand to live under constant theoretical examination.

A careful result need not say something vague about everything. It can specify that one part explains answer production, another introduces a linking assumption, and experienced character remains open in a stated sense. Further inquiry gains an address; achieved work retains its scope. Neither mystery nor a detailed mechanism chooses final metaphysics by itself. The selected sources show why that choice would require argument. Once preserved, the hard problem becomes more than a striking label. It acquires a subject that can be read, refined, and discussed with room for partial understanding and a further answer. The article's conclusion is therefore a clearer task, rather than an unsupported announcement that the ultimate task has already been completed.

What this means in practice

If you wish, choose a neutral description of a short sound or familiar colour. Separately record what was experienced, which action occurred, and which explanation was proposed. This voluntary work concerns wording rather than testing another person's condition. Ordinary words can remain without creating a measuring scale.

Locate one transition: how should an action's description explain experienced character? Identify a definition, assumption, principle, or supported inference. If its grounds remain

unread, retain a next question. An ultimate theory need not fill the gap merely to make the record appear finished.

Finish with a bounded statement about the understood step and remaining subject. The exercise tests neither consciousness, intelligence, memory, nor health and is no established therapy. Its possible result is a clearer question for explanation. You can stop, leave part open, or return to ordinary description without adopting any author's worldview.

Key quotation

> *"...we need an explanatory bridge to cross it." — David Chalmers, Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness, 1995, § 3; sentence fragment concerning the gap between functions and experience. The bridge expresses his argument's demand rather than a mechanism already discovered.*

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Substantive connection and boundary
Levine and Chalmers	Causal and functional explanation meets a demand for qualitative character. The arguments do not prove one metaphysics together.
Levine and Nagel	Intelligibility of connection and preservation of viewpoint impose different demands. Limited knowledge becomes no shared proof of impossible understanding.
Chalmers and Nagel	Experience's existence meets its subjective character. Philosophical examples provide no modern animal-brain verification.
James and Chalmers	Knowing function and experiential accompaniment begin from different concepts. James receives no answer to a later controversy by attribution.
James and Nagel	Experiential context and viewpoint require definite content. Resemblance establishes neither identical systems nor historical influence.

Primary sources

1. Joseph Levine, Materialism and Qualia: The Explanatory Gap, Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 64(4), 354–361, 1983. Original English published-paper scan. Selected pp. 354–359 read through the opening of minimal-reductionism discussion, rather than the whole text. The historical pain formula supplies no exhaustive contemporary neuroscience; epistemic and metaphysical conclusions remain distinct.

2. David J. Chalmers, Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness, Journal of Consciousness Studies 2(3), 200–219, 1995, original English on the author's website. Complete § 2 and selected § 3 through the next section read. Neither the whole paper nor its later proposed theory; the distinction remains the author's argument.

3. Thomas Nagel, What Is It Like to Be a Bat?, The Philosophical Review 83(4), 435–450, 1974, original English published-paper scan on a university teaching site. Selected pp. 435–442 read, including partial-viewpoint understanding and fallibility qualifications; neither the whole paper nor contemporary animal studies.

4. William James, Does 'Consciousness' Exist?, Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods 1, 477–491, 1904, original English York University transcription edited by Christopher D. Green. Previously actually read selected opening and two-context explanation reused; neither the complete essay nor system of radical empiricism.

Tags

consciousness, subjective experience, hard problem, explanatory gap, explanation, mechanism, function, experience, experiential quality, viewpoint, Levine, Chalmers, Nagel, James, philosophy of consciousness, materialism, metaphysics, epistemology, intelligibility, principle, assumption, argument, condition, sufficiency, necessity, primary sources, inference limits, uncertainty, reading, autonomy

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.