Explaining Consciousness

I. Chalmers’ “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness” (9-28)

A. How does Chalmers distinguish the easy problems of consciousness from the hard problem? (9-11)

B. Why does Chalmers believe the easy problems are easy and the hard problem is hard? (11-13)

1. What does Chalmers mean in stressing the point that it is a “conceptual fact” about the phenomena he considers “easy” that “their explanation only involves the explanation of various functions”? (11-12)

2. Why does Chalmers believes the problem of experience (the hard problem) cannot be explained by appeal to functions? (12-13)

C. Some Case Studies (in flawed attempts to explain consciousness) (13-16)

1. How do Crick and Koch propose to explain consciousness? What does Chalmers find unsatisfactory about it? (13-14)

2. What is Baars’ global workspace theory of consciousness? What does Chalmers find unsatisfactory about it? (14-15)

3. Different Strategies in the Attempt to Explain Consciousness? (15-16)

   a. What does Chalmers mean by the strategy “to deny the phenomenon”? How does Chalmers object to this strategy? (15-16)

   b. What does Chalmers mean by the strategy “to isolate the substrate of experience”? Why does he regard this as a reasonable, though incomplete strategy? (16)

4. Extra Ingredients (16-19)

   a. How does Chalmers object to the attempt to invoke non-algorithmic processing and quantum processes to explain consciousness? Why does he think that no physical explanation of consciousness can ever be satisfactory? (16-18)

   b. How does Chalmers defend his position against the objection that it is on a par with the “vitalist claim that no physical account could
explain life . . .”? (18-19)

5. Non-reductive Explanation (19-21)

a. How does Chalmers propose a different, non-reductive strategy for an explanation of consciousness which takes it as “fundamental”? What does it mean to take consciousness as fundamental? (19-20)

b. Chalmers says that his proposed theory of consciousness will consist of a number of “psychophysical principles.” What will these principles tell us about consciousness and its relation to the physical world? (20)

c. Why does he characterize his position as a “naturalistic dualism”? (20)

6. Toward a Theory of Consciousness (21-28)

a. What are the first two psychophysical principles he thinks an adequate theory of consciousness should embrace? (22-26)

b. The Double-Aspect Theory of Information (26-28)

(1) What does Chalmers mean by information and information spaces? (26)

(2) What is the “double-aspect principle” and how does it lead to the “natural hypothesis: that information . . . has two basic aspects”? What are these two basic aspects? How does the double aspect principle play the role of a “basic principle that might underlie and explain the emergence of experience from the physical”? (26-27)

(3) Noting the speculative character of the double aspect principle, how does Chalmers suggest that it leads to the possibility that “experience is much more widespread than we might have believed”? (27-28)

II. Dennett’s “Facing Backwards on the Problem of Consciousness” (33-36)

A. How does Dennett suggest that Chalmers’ position is comparable to that of an imaginary vitalist? (33)
B. How does Dennett argue that the question Chalmers believes can be raised of experience (“Why is the performance of these functions accompanied by experience?”) can also be raised by our imaginary vitalist and that this shows that the ability to raise the question actually demonstrates nothing at all about the nature of consciousness? (34)

C. How does Dennett argue that Chalmers is “flatly mistaken” in thinking that it is a conceptual point that “the explanation of function does not suffice for the explanation of experience”? (34-35)

III. Churchland’s “The Hornswoggle Problem” (37-44)

A. Why does Churchland believe that the idea that we would have left out explaining consciousness if all we had explained were the easy problems (the left out hypothesis) begs the question against “theories that are exploring the possibility that functions such as attention and short-term memory are crucial elements” in the emergence of consciousness? Why does she insist that this sort of theory can only be shown wrong by the facts, “not because of an arm-chair definition”? (38-39)

B. Reasoning from Ignorance (41-43)

1. What is the “argument from ignorance” and why is the argument a fallacy, establishing nothing at all? (41-42)

2. How does Churchland use the example of her vitalist high school Biology teacher to argue that reasoning on the basis of what you simply cannot imagine taking place doesn’t really establish anything about what you’re reasoning about? (42)

3. How does the history of science suggest that ignorance does not prepare us well to adequately distinguish easy from hard problems? (43)

IV. Chalmers’ Response to Dennett’s and Churchland’s Criticisms (379-387)

A. How does Chalmers distinguish type A materialists from type B materialists? (380)

B. How does Chalmers respond to Dennett’s comparison of his position with vitalism? (381)

C. How does Chalmers respond to Dennett’s contention that all he finds worth explaining in examining his own consciousness are functions? (383-385)
D. How does Chalmers respond to Dennett’s suggestion that ‘I wouldn’t know what I was thinking about if I couldn’t identify them by their functional differentia’? (384)

E. How does Chalmers respond to Churchland’s understanding of his position as based on an argument from ignorance? (386-387)

V. Clark’s “Function and Phenomenology” (45-59)

A. Chalmers’ Assumption (46-47)

1. What does Clark believe Chalmers assumes in making his conceptual point about consciousness? How does he believe this begs the question against his opponents? (46)

2. How does Clark argue that assuming at the start, at least, that consciousness is identical to neural functions is “simpler and more straightforward” way to proceed in a scientific investigation of consciousness? (47)

B. Sources of Resistance to Identifying Consciousness with Neural Processes (48-51)

The only factor he mentions that I believe might be interesting to discuss is the third. So, do you think he’s right that one of the reasons we resist the idea that consciousness is identical to neural processes in the brain is that we would lose “our privileged status” and be unable to clearly distinguish ourselves from “a very clever robot”? (50)

C. Clark’s Position: The Identity Hypothesis (51-54)

1. What is “the basic functional identity hypothesis” (51)

2. How does Clark appeal to Chalmers’ own principles of structural coherence and organizational invariance as evidence for his own identity hypothesis? (51-53)

3. How does Clark argue that the identity hypothesis explains the principles of structural coherence and organizational invariance better than Chalmers’ own principle of the double aspect character of information? (53-54)

D. Qualia (54-56)
1. How does Clark propose that the identity hypothesis can explain the privacy of qualia? (54)

2. How does Clark propose that the identity hypothesis can explain why qualia are ineffable? (54-55)

3. How does Clark challenge the idea that qualia have an intrinsic nature, irreducible to their function? How does he propose that we can distinguish, say, red from other colors without it being the case that red qualia have an intrinsic nature? (56)

E. How does Clark’s identity hypothesis enable him to say (with Chalmers) that “the meaning of the terms ‘phenomenal consciousness’ and ‘qualia’ is not (presently) identical to the meaning of the expression ‘neurally instatiated representational states’” and also (against Chalmers) that “talk about qualitative experience refers to the same thing as talk about particular neural processes”? (57-59)

VI. Chalmers’ Response to Clark (and Hardcastle as well, but we’ll be ignoring the bits that apply to her alone) (387-393)

A. How does Chalmers distinguish between a position (such as he attributes to Clark and Hardcastle) which asserts an a posteriori (empirical) identity between consciousness and physical processes and a position which asserts an a priori identity between the two? (388)

B. How does Chalmers argue that a properly explanatory identification of one thing with another must be a priori in character; that, as he puts it, identities “have to be earned”? How does he believe this shows the kind of identity between consciousness and physical processes which Clark and Hardcastle propose to not really explain how or why these physical processes are conscious? (389-391)