14.0 The General Argument:

Block’s tactic is to accuse functionalism of liberalism: that functionalism classifies certain systems as mental when they are not. This is achieved through the “absent qualia” argument - Block is attempting to construct a system which fulfils the functional analysis of what it is to have a mind, but in which it is at least prima facie (on the face of it) possible that that system lacks the “raw feels” or “what it is like” to be conscious.

It is important to note that we need not be concerned with what is actual, only what is possible – the functionalism claims that mental states are functional roles. That is, anything (even anything possible) that has the requisite functional roles must, thereby, have mental states. As a result, Block does not need to find something actual that meets the functional roles and lacks qualia - he only need so to find something possible.

14.1 The China Brain:

The China brain example is built on the possibility of a homunculi-headed system. In this system, once the neurons enter the brain, the stop, and instead of firing to other neurons, they light little signs. Inside the brain, there are little men (homunculi) who implement a machine table according to which little sign reads what.

It might be objected that this system is not nomologically possible (i.e. it violates the laws of science).

Imagine that instead of homunculi, we convert the government of China to functionalists, and implement the system using the entire population of China, short-wave radios, and satellites.

“What makes the homunculi-headed system (count the two systems as variants of the same system) just described a prima facie counterexample to (machine) functionalism is that there is prima facie doubt whether it has any mental states at all – especially whether it has what philosophers have variously called “qualitative states,” “raw feels,” or “immediate phenomenological qualities.”... In Nagel’s terms, there is prima facie doubt whether there is anything it is like to be the homunculi-headed system.”

-- Block, p. 278

Suppose that Q is identical to machine table state Sq. If there is nothing that its like to be the homunculi-headed system, it cannot be in Q even when it is in Sq. Thus, there is prima facie doubt that Q = Sq.
14.2 But suppose that you turned out to be a homunculi-headed system. Block rejects this on the ground that if I do have privileged access to the content of my qualia (which is surely true), that only proves that there might be one homunculi-headed system that has qualia - it does not remove the doubt that the China brain does not have qualia. I think that this is a terrible response.

14.3 Remember Putnam...

Clause 3. of Putnam’s account held that “No organism capable of feeling pain possesses a decomposition into parts which separately possess Descriptions of the kind referred to in (2.).” Block calls this move ‘ad hoc’ and it probably is:

consider the following possibility. Suppose that there is a region of this universe where the laws of physics are such that one can have intelligent, sentient creatures that are very, very, very small. These creatures are so small that they can build space ships that realize the relations of quantum mechanics. In the interest of society, they do this, and construct a planet that is superficially like ours – except that carbon is not made out of protons, electrons, and the like, but rather of shaceships and little creatures. If I move to this portion of the universe, and live there for a while, eventually, I will be made of this fool’s carbon - and I will surely still be conscious.

That means that I will be conscious, but parts of me will also be, and Putnam’s stipulation appears not only ad hoc, but fallacious.

14.4 Is the Prima facie doubt really prima facie?

Intuitions here are really unreliable - many things that used to appear intuitive (i.e. that the earth cannot move) now are not.

Second, perhaps the intuitions are clouded by the fact that the china brain was designed to mimic us, but we were not ‘designed’ to mimic anything.

Consider a totally faked Turing Test - it is clear that this thing is not intelligent at all, but that it fills a kind of functional role.

Isn’t the same thing at work here? Well, not really - as the TFTT does not have the same kind of machine table that, say, we do.

But then, The china brain is designed to be functionally equivalent to you - but since it need not be “empirically functionally” equivalent to you, it need not be something to which empirical psychological theories applies. And it is not something to which neurophysiological laws apply.

“Since the homunculi-headed Functional simulation of you is markedly unlike you neurophysiologically and since it need not be anything like you psychologically, it need not have mentality” (282)

It looks like this is simply begging the question.