

University of Cambridge  
Faculty of Philosophy 1A Metaphysics 2013-4  
Mind and Matter  
Lecture 4: the problem of consciousness

**1. Consciousness, awareness, what it's like, the phenomenal etc.**

Many pieces of terminology are used in the philosophical discussion of consciousness. 'Consciousness' and 'awareness' are often used in roughly the same way by philosophers and psychologists; but thereafter all agreement tends to end. What we need to do first is identify the *phenomenon* of consciousness, and distinguish it from the *theories* that have been proposed about the nature of consciousness.

**What it is like:** Thomas Nagel famously said that a creature is conscious when there is something it is like to be that creature. Much has been said about this phrase 'what it is like' (and invented substantives like 'what-it's-likeness') but the simplest thing to say is this: the phrase 'what x is like' can be used in a comparative way (what x *resembles*), as when we say 'what is Vegemite like? It's like Marmite'. But this is clearly not what Nagel means: when he asks, 'what is it like to be a bat?' he does not mean 'what does being a bat resemble?'. We know many answers to this question. Rather he means the phrase in the sense 'what it *feels* like'. There can be something it feels like to think about Vienna (on a specific occasion), for example, or to have indigestion, or to hear a trumpet etc.

Obviously then, the phrase is not supposed to be a *definition* of 'consciousness', since if you did not know what 'feels' means, you would not be able to figure out what 'conscious' meant!

**Phenomenal:** The term 'phenomenal' comes from the Greek word for *appearance*; so 'phenomenal' literally means, *pertaining to appearance*. If there are appearances – if things *appear* or *seem* some way to someone – then there is phenomenal consciousness. In this sense, feelings (pains and other sensations, emotional episodes), perceptual experiences, episodes of thinking and imagining are all *phenomenally conscious episodes*.

In these lectures, no heavy-duty theory is assumed by using the word 'phenomenal' (but note that some writers, e.g. Ned Block, use 'phenomenal' to pick out a specific *variety* of consciousness: see his paper, 'On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness').

**Qualia:** this is the plural of *quale*, the Latin word for 'quality' (in the sense of 'property' or 'attribute'). In the contemporary discussion of consciousness, the word is used for the distinctive qualities of conscious experience, e.g. the 'qualities' of the smell of coffee, the taste of marmite, the experience of a rose. It is not necessary to use the term 'qualia' in order to formulate the problem of consciousness, as we shall see.

**2. Nagel on what it's like to be a bat, and the 'explanatory gap'**

Nagel argued that (a) a bat is conscious, so there is something it is like to be a bat; but (b) no matter what we knew about the physiology of the bat, and of

its perceptual system, we would not *ipso facto* know what it was like to be a bat. So there is something incomplete about the materialist picture of our knowledge of the world.

Note that Nagel isn't saying that materialism is false, but that even if it were true, we would not be able to understand it. Nagel's claim is that there is an 'explanatory gap' between our knowledge of the physical and our knowledge of consciousness: i.e. a gap between our understanding of the physical world and our understanding of consciousness. Those who believe that there is such a gap do not necessarily believe that the mind is not physical; an explanatory gap is one thing, an 'ontological' gap is another.

However, Frank Jackson's 'knowledge argument' builds on Nagel's point about the bat, to argue that materialism (physicalism) is false (see Jackson, 'Epiphenomenal Qualia' 1982).

### 3. The knowledge argument

The argument relies first on the coherence of the thought experiment of Mary in the black and white room: she knows everything there is to know about the physics, physiology (etc.) of colour but has never seen red. Then she sees red for the first time.

Assuming this story, the argument goes:

*(i) Mary knows all the physical facts about colour in the room*

*(ii) Mary comes to learn something new when she sees red for the first time*

*(iii) What Mary learns is a fact*

**CONCLUSION:** *Not all facts are physical facts*

The argument is clearly valid: i.e. if the premises are true, then the conclusion is true. So if we want to evaluate the argument, we should look at the premises. Do any of the premises beg the question against materialism?

**The first premise:** if you deny this, then in effect you are assuming that in order to know all the physical facts about colour, you have to have had some specific kind of experience (e.g. an experience of colour). So for example you would have to reject Bertrand Russell's claim that 'a blind man can know the whole of physics' (*The Analysis of Matter* 1927).

**The second premise:** some physicalists say that Mary does not learn anything new, but rather only comes to gain a new way of representing what she knew already. Sometimes they draw a comparison with when one object can be known in two ways: e.g. the planet Venus has been known as 'Hesperus' and as 'Phosphorus'. However, if you think it was a discovery for the astronomers to learn that Hesperus is Phosphorus, then this analogy is not a good one, since a discovery is a new piece of knowledge! So drawing the comparison with Hesperus and Phosphorus, does not undermine premise 2, but it supports it!

**The third premise:** some physicalists dispute the third premise, and say Mary does learn something new, but it is not knowledge of a fact. Some (e.g. David Lewis) say that she learns only new 'ability' knowledge — the ability

to recognise, imagine, or remember red things. Others say that she gains only 'knowledge by acquaintance': she comes to know redness in a way that you can come to know a person or a place (knowing things).

Even if this is true, it does not show that premise 3 is false unless it can also be shown that Mary does not learn a fact. But just because someone acquires an ability to do X, it does not follow that they do not learn any facts about X.

If the argument is sound, does it refute physicalism? Only if physicalism is the view that all the facts are physical facts. But is this the best conception of physicalism? What if physicalism were a view about what objects and properties there are, and how all other objects and properties depend on them, as opposed to being a view about what facts there are? This is the conception of physicalism which was outlined in lecture 3.

Question: is this latter conception of physicalism refuted by the knowledge argument?

#### 4. The conceivability argument

**(NB This was not discussed in the lecture)**

The conceivability argument against materialism is a development of Descartes's argument in the 6<sup>th</sup> Meditation, for the 'real distinction' between mind and body. Descartes argued that because he could conceive of his mind and his body existing separately, then they are 'really distinct'.

The contemporary version of the argument, well formulated by David Chalmers (though not original to him) relies on the idea of a zombie, a creature physically indistinguishable from you or me but lacking consciousness. The argument:

*(i) Zombies are conceivable*

*(ii) What is conceivable is possible*

*(iii) Zombies are possible*

*(iv) If Zombies are possible, physicalism is false*

*CONCLUSION: physicalism is false*

Again the argument is valid. Many criticize premise (ii), and it is clear that there is no *entailment* from conceivability to possibility. But nonetheless there is a clear epistemic connection: what is conceivable is our best and only evidence for what is possible. So the conclusion would have to be weakened (question: what should the weaker conclusion be?). My own view is that physicalists should instead question premise (i).

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