

Philosophy 1320: Theories of the Mind, Stern College - Yeshiva University, Spring 2007
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://www.thatmarcusfamily.org/philosophy/Mind/MindHome.htm>

Lecture Notes, April 25 (our last class)

I. The hard problem of consciousness

On Monday, we saw that the problem of consciousness is a problem for physicalism.

Jackson argues for epiphenomenalism by considering three arguments for the falsity of physicalism, based on the reality of qualia.

Dennett describes qualia as the ineffable, intrinsic, private and immediately apprehensible results of purification, p 411.

The problem of accommodating qualia within a physical theory has become known as the hard problem of consciousness.

The easy problem involves describing the physical, neural bases of conscious experience.

II. Jackson's modal and knowledge arguments

Jackson insists that any theory of the mind must find a role for the qualities of our immediate experience. He calls himself a qualia freak.

He considers two distinct arguments for the legitimacy of qualia.

His modal argument is just that zombies are possible, p 403.

We saw zombies as objections specifically to functionalism.

But, they are problems for any physicalist view.

The Knowledge Argument has spawned a virtual industry of discussion, especially of Mary.

Fred can discriminate between two different reds, which look exactly the same to the rest of the normal-sighted world.

We can account for his ability in terms of physical facts, but can not see the different.

It seems that physicalism leaves something out.

Mary knows all the physical facts about color, while living in a completely black-and-white world.

When she leaves her room, she seems to learn something.

We can have all the scientific knowledge that there is to have, and still learn something about qualia.

III. Nagel's claim

Jackson mentions Nagel's argument, in support of his epiphenomenalism.

Nagel asks us to imagine what it is like to be a bat, p 393.

He considers how a Martian would be unable to imagine what it is like to be a human being.

We can do all the physico-chemical studies on bats, and the Martians can do all the physico-chemical studies on us.

Still, we will not be able to capture the subjective character of the bat's experience, p 391.

And the Martian won't be able to capture the subjective character of our experience.

There are facts that are not objective facts.

Nagel says that there are facts not expressible in human concepts.

IV. Dennett's eliminativism

The eliminativist will deny that there are any experiences to have.

Dennett takes the eliminativist, or Quinean, approach.

He notes that Einstein alleged that science could never give us the taste of soup.

And that Wittgenstein said that nothing would serve as well as something about which nothing could be said.

Dennett wants to deny even that qualia are something about which nothing can be said.

They are, in fact, nothing, p 413.

Note that Dennett is arguing on the side of the eliminative materialist.

We can take his article as a supplement to Churchland's denial of the correspondence between neural states and the intentional states that folk psychology attributes to us.

Dennett imagines a case of Chase and Sanborn, both of whom were tasters for, and loved, Maxwell House coffee.

After a while, both of them realize that they no longer love the same coffee.

Chase alleges that his qualia are the same, but his evaluations of those same sensations has shifted.

Sanborn alleges that his qualia have shifted.

The challenge is to determine whether they are correct, or whether they are misdiagnosing themselves.

Perhaps the truth for each lies in between.

The point of the example is that if qualia are real, then there should be a fact of the matter about whether Chase and Sanborn are correct about their judgments.

Concerns about memory play a role in evaluating the case.

Both Chase and Sanborn claim to be able to compare their former qualia with their present qualia.

We can perform tests on their memories, by examining their abilities to discriminate.

If they fail such tests, then we have reason to believe that their memories are faulty, and that their claims are unsupported.

But, if they pass these tests, we still lack confirming evidence for their original claims.

We can also perform tests on their perceptual apparatus, their taste buds, to look for anomalies.

If Sanborn is right, there might be an obvious physiological explanation for the change in qualia, one which would not undermine their reality.

But, without a corresponding physiological explanation for the shift in qualia, there is no evidence to support Sanborn.

The general attack on the reality of qualia implicit in the Chase and Sanborn example relies on problems accessing our memories of qualia in order to perform intra-personal comparisons.

These problems, though, might be attributable to difficulties with memory, and not with the reality of qualia.

Dennett slides from doubts about comparisons, in which memory does serve a role, to doubts about occurrent states, which may not be infected at all with the worries about memory.

Thus, even if we have difficulties determining the veracity of Chase and Sanborn's claims, the qualia I have now are not impugned.

Still, if qualia are inaccessible in memory, they may be useless to science, even if they are real.

The Chase and Sanborn case presents a challenge for the qualia freak.

If qualia are going to be real phenomena for which physical science must account, we should be able to rely on them to discriminate between Chase and Sanborn.

But, Dennett argues, there are reasons to think that qualia are just not substantial enough to play that role.

Dennett's argument mostly consists of characterizing the traditional notions of qualia, and then showing that there is nothing that has these characteristics.

He characterizes qualia as allegedly being:

- a. ineffable (inexpressible);
- b. intrinsic;
- c. private; and
- d. directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness.

V. Against ineffability

The claim of ineffability is really Nagel's claim, that we can not describe experiences in a way that would make them available to others.

Nagel used it to show the insufficiency of physical theories of the mind.

Nagel thinks that since we have qualia, theories which omit them are unacceptable.

Dennett is using ineffability to undermine the legitimacy of qualia.

If qualia are really ineffable, then we should suspect that they can play no role in legitimate, scientific explanation.

Moreover, we can eff the ineffable, at least in part.

The reason that our perceptual experiences have seemed undecipherable is that they are highly sensitive, in a way that my language is unable to match.

Dennett compares my ability to discriminate sounds or colors to the complexity of the cut from a ripped jello box.

The best way to describe the cut is just to find its match.

Similarly, the best way to describe my auditory experience is simply by comparing it to my own experience.

But, such experiences are not isolated from objective evaluation.

They are merely complex, p 428.

Dennett thus implies that if language were more fine-grained, more detailed, we could describe the various phenomenal information properties (pips) of psychological events, p 429.

So-called phenomenal properties need not be ineffable, but also need not be seen as phenomenal (e.g. private and directly accessible.)

VI. Against intrinsicity

Dennett uses the beer-drinking example to show that qualia have relational properties, and so are not purely intrinsic.

Every one's first sip tastes awful, but some people come to like it.

If tastes are acquired, then what we think about them shifts with our experience.

There is no single way that it tastes, independent of my past experiences.

Chase thinks that his qualia are the same, but his wife urges that once he adds the dislike he changes the experience, p 421.

In the cauliflower example, we are given a pill which makes us like cauliflower. Since we never liked cauliflower, ex hypothesi, it would seem that the pill must change its taste. But, another possibility is that it merely changes the way we feel about the taste. The latter possibility is preferable, since it leaves the cauliflower alone. But, it also means, again, that there is no way that it tastes, independent of my past experiences.

Consider also the phenol-thiol-urea example. Some portion of humans find it extremely bitter; some find it tasteless, and whether you find it bitter or tasteless depends on your genes. (I don't know about phenol-thiol-urea, but I had a similar experience with litmus paper.) Dennett argues that if we got rid of all of the humans with a genetic ability to taste it, then we would think that it is intrinsically tasteless. If we did the reverse experiment, and got rid of all the humans with a genetic inability to taste it, then we would think that it is intrinsically bitter. The taste is thus relational, rather than intrinsic.

One response to Dennett's beer, cauliflower, and phenol examples would be to claim that all those objects have intrinsic tastes to those who taste them, and lack intrinsic tastes to those who do not. Remember, the intrinsicity is supposed to be a property of the qualia, not of the object tasted. We already know, from the primary/secondary distinction, that objects have taste properties only relationally.

As Dennett later notes, the intrinsicity of secondary properties of objects has long been abandoned. But, the question here is about the intrinsicity of the properties of my experience. Dennett thinks that we should abandon intrinsicity for qualia just as we abandoned it for public objects. But, the argument from analogy is weak, in part because we were able to give up the intrinsicity of color, or pain, or hot and cold, as publically observable properties, because we retained it as a property of my mental states. Dennett's main argument is that philosophers have not provided a good account of what it means for a property to be intrinsic. But, it seems clear that we know what we are talking about, even if necessary and sufficient conditions are difficult to come by. And, what's wrong with 'non-relational'?

Dennett also cites worries about visual field's being intrinsically right-side up, p 423. This example is much stronger. There seems to be no fact of the matter about whether the field is inverted and people adjust, or whether their field becomes resolved. If Dennett's interpretation is correct, then the intrinsicity of my qualia seems lost.

VII. Against privacy

Against privacy, Dennett argues that qualia are not really private, but to the extent that they are, they are

illegitimate.

Uncharitably, this is a bit like saying that I didn't steal the money, but if I did steal it, I had a good reason.

To show that qualia are not really private, Dennett argues that third-person assessments of our qualia may be much better than first-person assessments.

In fact, Dennett takes this to be the moral of the memory problems that Chase and Sanborn faced.

In general, our own memories are liable to errors.

Videotape is much more reliable than memory, for most of us.

Dennett also points out that third-person assessments are better than first-person assessments in cases where we evaluate lighting intensity, or our own body temperature.

In such cases, we look to objective measures, over our own apprehensions.

If we had good evidence for the immediate, and infallible, apprehension of qualia, then we would override third-person considerations.

But, considerations of memory especially, seem to erode our confidence in our first-person access.

For these reasons, empirical testing will not settle the Chase and Sanborn cases.

For, we can never know if the problem arises from faulty memory, p 420.

Still, even if third-person assessments are somehow more reliable, first-person assessments seem private.

To show that qualia are illegitimate if private, Dennett relies on a positivist argument: statements which refer to qualia are unverifiable.

Consider again the problem of inverted spectra.

It seems as if there is no way to determine whether two people have inverted spectra, since they would both agree in behavior.

Dennett imagines a tube connecting two brains, so that one person can see, with eyes closed, the visual field of the other.

At first, the grass looks red, the sky looks yellow, and I think that we have inverted qualia.

Then, we invert the tube and the colors look the way they ordinarily do.

We do not know which way is the right way to turn the tube.

One can strengthen the problem by surgically inverting portions of the brain of one individual, to invert the spectra.

But, that individual would not know whether his or her memory has failed, or if the colors are really different.

It looks as if both intersubjective and intrasubjective comparisons of qualia are impossible.

If we can not, even in principle, compare these properties, we should be wary of thinking they are real.

Furthermore, qualia are only private in the sense that my access to them is highly idiosyncratic, p 428.

Their privacy, Dennett alleges, consists only in the fact that I alone get to respond to them.

VIII. Against qualia being directly or immediately apprehended

The Cartesian claim that we have direct access to our mental states entails that our experience is incorrigible.

We can not fail to seem to see red, or seem to be in pain, even if we are not actually seeing red or in pain.

The examples of cerebral achromatopsia undermine the idea that qualia are immediately apprehended. Some subjects appear to be missing qualia.

But, others similarly can not verbally report on their qualia, even though they can perform non-verbal tasks which make it clear that they must be experiencing colors, p 424.

Similarly, consider Dennett's final intuition pump, of the guitar string, p 430.

We do not immediately hear all the harmonics, but we can be trained to hear them.

Similarly, we can train ourselves to discriminate all sorts of tastes in wine.

Not only does our ability to train up our senses once again cast doubt on the intrinsic properties of our qualia, but it seems that these properties are neither directly or immediately apprehended.

We have subjective authority, in a limited sense, but not infallibility or incorrigibility.

Consider again the Chase and Sanborn case.

Dennett argues that there is no fact of the matter whether Chase or Sanborn is right, or neither is.

Still, many of his arguments rely on problems with memory and intra-personal comparisons.

These problems may be essentially epistemic.

That is, even if qualia are real, they may be useless inscience.

Thus, the response Dennett tends to get to his arguments resists his eliminative conclusion, p 417.

Still, Dennett has at least given reasons to avoid qualia in physics.

IX. Beyond physicalism

If Nagel and Jackson are right that we must accommodate phenomenal facts, then the problem seems to boomerang on all kinds of reductive definitions.

For example, we reduce color to wavelength of reflected light.

But descriptions of the wavelength of light omit facts about its effects on perceivers.

This omission was no worry for physics, since explanations of color were relegated to the theory of consciousness.

The primary/secondary distinction moved the primary qualities into the mind, so that physics need not worry about them.

But, if we are looking for a scientific theory of consciousness, then we can not shunt them off elsewhere.

(Unless we move them back out into the world, with Aristotle.)

The eliminativist about the phenomenal character of experience thus denies what must be taken as a brute fact about the world, as Nagel notes, p 392.

The obvious interpretation of Nagel's article is that it shows that physicalism must be false.

Nagel instead says that it shows that we can't understand how it might be true.

(From which a claim of its falsity should pretty quickly follow!)

Jackson thinks that Nagel's argument shows that physicalism effectively omits two kinds of knowledge.

First, physicalism omits the qualia.

Fred knows something that we don't know; Mary learns something when she comes out of her room.

Second, physicalism omits the first-person perspective.

Nagel is right that the first-person perspective is missing.

But, every one's problem is no one's problem.

That is, there doesn't seem to be an objection to physicalism in the problem of imagining what it is like

to be such an alien creature.

The problem is just in the omission of the experience.

If physicalism is wrong, something must replace it.

X. Epiphenomenalism revisited

Jackson defends a version of epiphenomenalism.

Remember that epiphenomenalism is a dualist claim that allows causal efficacy only from the physical to the mental.

Physical states affect mental states, but mental states do not effect physical states.

Traditional epiphenomenalists may claim that mental states are completely non-efficiacious.

Jackson remains agnostic whether mental states can affect other mental states, and so differs from traditional epiphenomenalists.

Further, Jackson's version of epiphenomenalism concerns mental properties, not mental states.

That is, Jackson is defending a version of property dualism, not a version of substance dualism.

Jackson's argument for epiphenomenalism started with the falsity of physicalism on the basis of the reality of qualia.

We have seen that Dennett denies that qualia are real, for the purposes of science.

But, Jackson's arguments, especially his knowledge argument, resist Dennett's conclusion, especially since Jackson does not insist on assimilating qualia into physics.

Further, Jackson provides three arguments that qualia are not causally efficacious, even if they are real.

All three arguments are similar in that they attribute causal efficacy to that which cause the qualia, physical processes, presumably in the brain, rather than to the qualia themselves.

XI. The Hume argument

It might seem that qualia are causally efficacious in the physical world.

For, it seems that the feeling of pain, when a piano drops on my foot, me to say that I am in pain, hop about, and bark.

Causal connections are posited on the basis of conjunctions of events.

For example, every time I let go of my keys, they fall to the ground.

We can legitimately posit some underlying cause of the phenomenon.

Now, consider the fact that every time my watch says the time, my cellphone says that it is the same time.

We have here a reliable conjunction of events.

But, we do not posit a causal relation between my watch and my cellphone.

Rather, we find common underlying causes.

It is not that my watch makes my cellphone say that it is a particular time, or vice versa.

It is just that the laws of physics work reliably in both cases.

Applying this lesson, which Jackson credits to Hume, if there were some underlying cause of both my pain and my hopping about, we could eliminate the belief that qualia were causally efficacious.

Jackson uses an example from a movie, p 405, to avoid admitting the causal efficacy of qualia on the

basis of examples like that of the piano.

XII. The Darwin argument

One might present an evolutionary argument for the causal efficacy of qualia:

1. We have qualia.
 2. Lower animals, earlier forms of life, do not.
 3. So, they appeared at some point in evolution.
 4. Thus, they must have some evolutionary role.
- Thus, they must be causally efficacious.

Jackson points out that evolutionary explanations such as this are invalid, since some traits which are not conducive to survival may persist, as long as they do not hinder survival too much.

He uses the example of the heavy coat of a polar bear.

Thus, all we can conclude is that qualia are either causally efficacious, or by-products of something that is causally efficacious.

Just as in the Hume argument, causal efficacy need not be ascribed directly to the qualia.

Jackson adds that evolutionary theory is not going to explain everything, p 407.

XIII. Other minds

The argument from other minds that we should attribute causal efficacy to qualia runs as follows:

We infer know that other people have minds because, at least in part, of their behavior.

But, in my own case, it seems that my qualia cause my behavior.

Thus, it is reasonable to posit that the same causal relation holds in the cases of other people.

So, we should attribute causal efficacy to the qualia.

Again, Jackson argues that the causal efficacy should be attributed to whatever causes the qualia, and not to the qualia themselves.

We can attribute qualia to other people just because they have behavior which correlates with qualia in my case.

But, we need not think that the qualia cause anything.

Qualia may be caused by something casually efficacious, but they need not be themselves involved.

XIV. Conclusions

Jackson's epiphenomenalism has been influential.

Still, the parsimony of physicalism makes it hard to resist.

One response to the modal argument, as Jackson notes, is to deny the possibility of zombies.

His argument merely rests on a modal intuition, that zombies are possible.

But, if one were committed to physicalism, one could just deny that modal intuition.

The knowledge argument does not rest on a modal intuition, so the physicalist makes no progress by

denying that Fred and Mary are possible.

In the end, it seems to come to this:

Do Dennett's eliminativist argument outweigh Jackson's knowledge argument?

If so, maybe we can describe what Mary is missing and what Fred has without calling it knowledge.

Similarly, perhaps Nagel's first-person perspective is not the kind of thing for which science can strive.

The most prudent response, now, is to wait for a solution to the easy problem of consciousness and then see what is left.

Perhaps, as Churchland and Dennett think, a complete neuroscience will not omit anything we see as important.

Or, perhaps it will put the omissions in a stark light.

Either way, to pronounce an outcome right now seems purely speculative.

The end.