

Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge. New Essays on Consciousness and Physicalism by Alter, Torin and Walter, Sven (Eds.), Philosophy of Mind Series, Oxford University Press, Pp. x + 349.

The book is a collection of 13 new essays on two topics: the knowledge argument and the theory of phenomenal concepts. The connection between them is that the notion of a phenomenal concept was initially, in the early 1990s, introduced as a way to reply to some famous anti-physicalist arguments, one of them being the above-mentioned knowledge argument (independently proposed in 1982 by Frank Jackson in his article “Epiphenomenal qualia,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 32, pp. 127-36, and by Howard Robinson in his book *Matter and Sense*, Cambridge U.P., 1982, pp 4-5).

This connection between the two topics could well have served as a pretext for putting together articles about them in a book, and thus make the collection appear unitary. However, the editors didn’t exploit this option. Part one, phenomenal knowledge, and part two, phenomenal concepts, don’t seem too connected. The notion of a phenomenal concept is barely present in the first part, and, strangely enough, precisely the phenomenal concept based reply to the knowledge argument is missing. The second part contains articles that discuss the theory of phenomenal concepts, but its exact relevance to the knowledge argument is not especially focused on. Another oddity is the size disproportion between the two parts: the first comprises 72 pages of the book, while the second 250. One also wonders why the order of the two parts in the book is the reverse of the order on the cover. Finally, in the section with information on contributors (p. x) David Papineau appears as affiliated with King’s College, Cambridge University, while he is in fact at King’s College, University of London.

That being said let us proceed to discussing the content. I will briefly present the main points of each article, but also offer some more detailed view on some of them, where I think some critical remarks are worth putting forward.

The first one is by Daniel Dennett. Earlier, in 1991, Dennett famously denied any new knowledge acquisition by Jackson’s Mary –the fictional super-scientist raised in a colourless environment and knowing all matters physical about colour vision- when she is first seeing coloured objects. In this article he reiterates his point and offers a development of his previous argument. As before, Dennett acknowledges that his view is counterintuitive – it looks unbelievable that Mary could already know what it is like to see red while still in her black-and-white room- but he thinks this only indicates a failure on the part of disbelievers to appreciate just how much knowing *everything* physical about colour vision would mean. Dennett goes further and attempts now to show how exactly Mary could “figure out” what it is like to see red while in her colourless room. He imagines RoboMary, a robot equipped with black-and-white cameras and otherwise having all that is needed for colour vision in terms of hardware, but having at the same time installed a blocker or locker software routine that prevents the robot to self-stimulate and get colour experiences, so that both peripherally and centrally its colour vision system is forced to work with gray-scale values. Then Dennett’s central argument is this (p. 28):

“She looks at the (gray-appearing) tomato and reacts however she does, resulting is, say, thousands of temporary settings of her cognitive machinery. Call that voluminous state of her total response to the locked gray-tomato-viewing *state A*. This is a state of her knowing what it is like for her to see a gray tomato. Then she compares state A with the state that her model of herself goes into.(...) And since this is the model of herself, it then goes into *state B*, the state she would have gone into if her color system hadn’t been locked. RoboMary notes all the differences between state A, the state she was thrown into by her locked color system,

and state B, the state she would have been thrown into had her color system not been locked, and – being such a clever, indefatigable, and nearly omniscient being- makes all the necessary adjustments and *puts herself into state B.*”

Dennett’s line of thought is perplexing. First, RoboMary’s putting herself into state B is, *mutatis mutandis*, the same thing as the original Mary’s being released from her colourless room, so Dennett’s case shows not that RoboMary can figure out what it is like to see red, but rather the contrary, that up until getting herself put into state B (which is a colour-experiential state just like Mary’s first encounter with a red rose) she has no idea of what it is like to see red.

Second, if Dennet is right, then even Lewis and Nemirow are wrong in thinking that at least the knowledge-how embedded in the ability of RoboMary to imagine and remember experiences of red is not present in her before she actually experiences red. But this is very strange, if not absurd, because then the following cases are to be believed:

- a. John is an expert in, i.e. knows everything about, the mechanics involved in bicycle riding; however, he never rode one. But given his complete knowledge of bike mechanics, if he is given a bike, he will just ride it like a professional biker.
- b. Jim is an expert in the cognitive neurophysiology of schizophrenia; however, he is a normal subject, i.e. does not suffer from schizophrenia. But given his complete knowledge of the neural basis of schizophrenia he has no trouble at all in becoming a schizophrenic whenever he wants it.

Of course, one can multiply such “amazing” cases indefinitely (just replace schizophrenia with homosexuality, musical genius, or whatnot). Dennett’s thinking in the quoted passage is simply magical: it is hard to see just how and why exactly RoboMary can put herself into state B, unless she has some magical powers.

We can go further. If what it is like to see red can be figured out from purely physical information, then a visual system is not needed at all for this purpose. Imagine another Mary-like case – an expert in colour vision all whose brain areas were extirpated except for a logico-mathematical processing area and the one responsible for hearing. She could be taught all the physical information about colour vision since it comes in the form of numbers, equations, codes; and we can let her associate sounds and words with all numerically encoded colour shades and corresponding brain states. If Dennet were right, she could form a “model of herself”, and figure out what it is like to see red. Of course, there is a metaphorical sense in which she would know what it is like *to hear red*, but that is not the sense that is relevant for the debate.

The next article is by Laurence Nemirow, the originator of the ability hypothesis as a reply to the knowledge argument – Mary does not gain any factual knowledge, but only knowledge how to imagine, remember, and recognize experiences. He defends the view against older and more recent objections.

The next two articles, by Frank Jackson and Torin Alter, respectively, discuss the issue of whether the diaphanousness based argument for representationalism is also effective in undermining the knowledge argument. Jackson’s answer is positive, while Alter argues that representationalism is a red herring in this debate.

Part one ends with an article by the late Knut Nordby, a real-life quasi-counterpart of Mary – a colour-blind expert in vision science. He argues, based on empirical findings, that a person like Mary, as a result of not having the relevant cortical area stimulated for a long time, would lose much of her brain functions associated with colour vision. When released the

person would be able to sense and discriminate colour hues, but unable to name them on the basis of her previous knowledge.

Part two deals with the topic of phenomenal concepts. The first two articles expound theories of phenomenal concepts. Janet Levin proposes a return to the roots of the theory –the type-demonstrative account due to Brian Loar- because she thinks later additions, emendations, developments of it concede too much to the dualist. David Papineau develops a theory of phenomenal concepts as contrasted with perceptual concepts, and replies to a dilemma for the phenomenal concept strategy proposed by David Chalmers. The dilemma is that either the strategy explains the epistemic gap between physical and phenomenal truths in a physicalistically acceptable way, in which case it does not explain our epistemic situation (why we can conceive of physical duplication without phenomenal duplication), or else the strategy explains our epistemic situation, in which case a new epistemic gap is opened, the one between physical truths and truths about phenomenal concepts. Papineau thinks the materialist can embrace both horns.

The next two articles are by Joseph Levine and David Chalmers, respectively, where the above dilemma is developed and discussed. Their views are pessimistic as regards the materialists' resources to respond.

John Hawthorne's article points out a tension in the semantic views of certain anti-physicalists, like Chalmers, who both believe in Fregean arguments against direct reference theories, and in the direct reference of phenomenal concepts. He points out that the thought experiments motivating Fregeanism can be applied to the case of phenomenal concepts as well.

Stephen White defends his property dualism argument (based on an objection to J.J.C. Smart's mind-brain identity thesis put forward by Max Black in the 1950s), while Ned Block's article is a defence of materialism against this argument. The argument is that if there are mental/physical property identities, these are not a priori, and the only explanation for this feature is that at least one of the concepts expressing one of the properties in question has to pick out that property via a distinct contingent property of that property. The consequence is that there are properties that are contingently related to the totality of physical properties, which means that physicalism is false.

Block argues that the argument is based on the thesis that whenever there is a difference in modes of presentation of a property, there is a difference at the level of the properties of that property. Block argues that the argument errs in that it conflates two distinct notions of mode of presentation, what he calls "conceptual mode of presentation" versus "metaphysical mode of presentation" of a term (CMOP and MMOP in what follows, respectively). The former kind is understood in terms of its cognitive, semantic, and inferential role, while the latter is understood as the property of the referent in virtue of which CMOP plays the role it plays. Then Block offers alleged counterexamples to the thesis that a difference in CMOP entails a difference in MMOP: he argues that there are examples of terms with two CMOPs and one MMOP. I find all his examples unpersuasive, but for reasons of space I only mention two of them, one about singular terms and one about general ones:

Example 1: Consider "the wet thing in the corner = the thing in the corner covered or soaked in H₂O". Block says that we have two CMOPs here and only one MMOP, because the property of being the wet thing in the corner is the property of being the thing in the corner covered or soaked in H₂O, while the corresponding descriptions (the CMOPs) are clearly distinct. If Block were right, then all Frege cases of informative identities are cases of one MMOP and two CMOPs: take "The Evening Star = The Morning Star", and note that the property of being The Evening Star = the property of being The Morning Star. But, of course it is not this kind of object-dependent properties that are relevant for the discussion (I myself

would not accept these as properties at all!), but the property of being visible in the evening and the property of being visible in the morning, which are distinct MMOPs, of course.

Example 2: An English speaker learns the French term “chat” from a monolingual French speaker who exhibits cats, and then is taught the term “chat” again by the same forgetful teacher exhibiting the same cats. The student tacitly assumes that there are two kinds of “chat”, and so attaches the two kinds to two separate mental files, both containing the term “chat”. To learn “this chat = this chat” is informative, so there are two CMOPs associated with the term; however, there is only one MMOP, namely the collection of the observable properties of cats, e.g. being furry, purr, etc. However, I think Block is wrong - the following explanation is more plausible. The student has no idea about what the real difference between the two alleged kinds of things denoted by “chat” is, so all he can do is to create two names “chat1” and “chat2” to be put in his distinct mental files and to be considered as referring to the original term “chat”. The meaning of “chat1” is “the “chat” that is in mental file 1”; *mutatis mutandis* for “chat2”. He in effect goes metalinguistic, and takes “chat” as an object rather than as a sign, as Frege put it. The result is nevertheless two MMOPs distinguished by their shape configuration – the property of physically appearing as “chat1” and the property of physically appearing as “chat2” – and two CMOPs “chat1” and “chat2”, their common reference being “chat”.

The final article in the book is by Martine Nida-Rümelin, in which she proposes an argument for property-dualism, similar in many respects to what has been proposed by Kripke and Chalmers. She formulates her discussion in terms of the Jackson/Chalmers type two-dimensional semantic framework, and then compares her argument with those of Chalmers and Kripke.

All in all, it is a useful book I would recommend to those who are working on consciousness and physicalism.

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