Review of Michael Tye’s *Consciousness Revisited: Materialism without Phenomenal Concepts*

The problem of Mary and the black and white room is well known. Mary is a neuroscientist and knows all the physical facts about color vision. She has grown up in a black and white room, and has never experienced red. When she leaves the room, and sees red for the first time, there is a strong intuition that she learns something new: something along the lines of ‘this is the experience of red’ or ‘this is what it is like to experience red’. If she learns a new fact on exiting the room, then this fact is not a physical fact, as *ex hypothesi*, Mary knew all the facts relevant to color vision while in the room. If there are non-physical facts, then physicalism is false.

There is a popular solution to this, which Tye calls the “phenomenal concept strategy”. According to the phenomenal concept strategy, Mary acquires new concepts when she leaves the room. With these new concepts, Mary is able to think new thoughts, and make new discoveries. These new discoveries are facts whose truth conditions Mary already knew, but which she knew via other concepts.

The concepts that Mary acquires upon leaving the room and seeing red for the first time are called by proponents of the phenomenal content strategy “phenomenal concepts”. Tye has two aims in this book. One is to argue that the phenomenal concept strategy is wrong, because, according to him, there are no phenomenal concepts. The other is to present his own solution to the Mary puzzle, and other puzzles about consciousness facing physicalists.

Tye explores various accounts of phenomenal concepts and finds them all unsatisfactory. One account he considers is Ned Block’s account that phenomenal concepts are demonstrative concepts using phenomenal sortals. According to this view, when Mary leaves the room, she acquires a new concept of the property of being red, and that concept is a demonstrative concept of the form *that phenomenal property*.

Tye’s main concern with this view is about how the references of the phenomenal concepts are fixed. Suppose I have an experience that represents the property of being scarlet, and I think the thought ‘that phenomenal property’. Tye asks ‘Which of the … properties is the one to which the demonstrative concept *that phenomenal property* refers?’. The options, Tye says, include scarlet, dark red, red, being colored. Tye calls this “the problem of too many eligible candidates”.

The problem of too many eligible candidates, and the problem of determining reference generally, have analogs outside of the realm of the debate over phenomenal concepts. Quine argued with his example of ‘gavagai’ that there were too many eligible candidates for the meaning of ‘gavagai’. Kripke discussed the difficulties of determining whether ‘addition’ means addition or quaddition. When someone points at a scene and says ‘that is interesting’, there are normally many eligible candidates for the reference of ‘that’, and therefore a question of how reference succeeds, as we assume it does.

It is not clear why the problem that Tye identifies of reference-determination for phenomenal concepts isn’t the same problem as one that concerns reference generally. It would be interesting to know Tye’s thoughts here.

Another concern that Tye raises is that there may not always be an appropriate conscious experience of red to anchor the demonstrative phenomenal concept *that phenomenal property.* After Mary has seen red, and has acquired the relevant phenomenal concept, she may think ‘post-boxes are red’ without having an experience of red at the time of thinking that thought.

One reply available to proponents of the phenomenal concept strategy is to say that there are demonstrative ways of thinking about red, and non-demonstrative ways of thinking about red. When red is presented in experience, as, for example, when Mary leaves the room and sees red for the first time, the demonstrative way is available to her, and it isn’t otherwise (unless, perhaps, it is presented in another phenomenally conscious state such as memory or imagination).

The defender of the phenomenal concept strategy can say that the fact that there isn’t always an anchor state making demonstrative thought about red possible doesn’t mean that, when there is such an anchor state present, demonstrative thought about red isn’t possible, or that it doesn’t occur. Defenders of the phenomenal concept strategy just need phenomenal concepts to be available to Mary when she experiences red for the first time; they don’t need phenomenal concepts to be available to Mary all the time.

After rejecting the phenomenal concept strategy, Tye develops his own solution to the Mary puzzle, and to other puzzles about consciousness that threaten physicalism. Tye’s solution to the puzzles turns on the notion of *acquaintance*. According to Tye, there is both propositional knowledge, which is knowledge of propositions, and there is thing knowledge, which is knowledge of things. Acquaintance is thing-knowledge. According to Tye, when I say “I know Athens’, or ‘I know my brother”, I am expressing thing knowledge, or acquaintance, of the things in question.

According to Tye, when Mary leaves the room and experiences red, the key epistemic achievement she makes is that she becomes acquainted with the color red, and thereby comes to know red. This particular discovery is not a discovery of a fact, and so physicalism is not threatened. Mary does not come to know any new facts upon leaving the room.

The notion of acquaintance is an interesting one, though I thought it was somewhat under-explored in the book. Although Tye never says this directly, from a number of descriptions of acquaintance that he provides throughout the book, I came away with the impression that Tye thinks that the state of experiencing red is both necessary and sufficient for the state of being acquainted with red, and furthermore, that this necessitated biconditional is knowable a priori.

If one’s intuition is that Mary, upon leaving the room, makes an epistemic achievement that goes beyond simply experiencing red, then it doesn’t seem that Tye’s notion of acquaintance can explain that intuition. If being acquainted with red just is experiencing red, and if one asks ‘What epistemic event occurs in Mary’s mind when she sees red for the first time, over and above the event of her experiencing red?’, saying that Mary becomes acquainted with red is not available as an answer. “Becoming acquainted with red” is only available as answer to a question like that if being acquainted with red is not equivalent to experiencing red.

There is also a question why, on Tye’s account, Mary can’t become acquainted with red while still in the black and white room, given her comprehensive neuroscientific knowledge. Suppose that Mary is investigating via a cerebroscope the brain of a subject called “Bill”. Like Mary, Bill has also grown up in a black and white room, and has never experienced red. While investigating Bill’s brain, Mary induces in Bill a hallucination of red. According to Tye’s view of hallucination, this hallucination enables Bill to be acquainted with red. Since acquaintance is a physical relation, and red is a physical property, there is a question whether Mary’s comprehensive knowledge of everything going on in Bill’s brain should enable her to become acquainted with the object of Bill’s acquaintance, namely red. It seems hard to see what could explain how Mary fails to become acquainted with red in this situation, and yet it’s a part of Tye’s view that Mary is not acquainted with red while still in the room.

Another way of putting this is that the phenomenal character of red is not elusive to Bill when Bill is undergoing the hallucination of red, but somehow it is elusive to Mary. Given that Mary knows all the physical facts about Bill’s brain, why is that?

The discussion of the consciousness puzzles forms the main part of the book, but there are also chapters on the admissible contents of experience, change blindness, and privileged access.

The book is thought-provoking. I enjoyed reading it, and thinking through its arguments. I would have liked to see a more extended discussion of the notion of acquaintance, especially on the question whether acquaintance is supposed to be identical to experience or not. It turns out that Tye used to be a major proponent of the phenomenal strategy in earlier work. It is nice to see someone say ‘I was completely wrong before. Here is my new view’!