

Consciousness #5



NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF THE MIND

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Seminar 5

1. Recap: the relevance of physicalism and dualism
2. Physicalist theories of consciousness and intentionality
3. Consciousness: preliminaries

1. The relevance of physicalism (and dualism)

1. How can we establish whether physicalism is true?
2. Even if we can establish it, what would this tell us about the mind?

omnis caro foenum



‘All flesh is grass’



A clarification

Last week's question: even if we can establish physicalism, what would this tell us about the mind?

I said: not much

Craig pointed out that if physicalism involved an explanatory reduction, then this isn't true

Craig is right: I should have said *supervenience* would not tell us much about the mind

The relevance of explanatory reduction

- If there could be an explanatory reduction of mental properties, then this would advance our knowledge
- But the only explanatory reductions so far offered have been sketchy and unconvincing
- And the explanatory gap seems to remain for the case of consciousness

Dualism

- If we accept the distinctness of mental and physical properties, then we are property dualists in a weak sense
- (Property dualism in the strong sense — e.g. David Chalmers's version — rejects supervenience)
- But how far does this get us?
- Not very far

Substance



Property



Substance and property

- The difference in substances is explained in terms of a difference in their characteristic attributes
- Descartes: 'thought' and extension
- But what is the nature of these properties themselves?
- *The answer to this question is independent of the question of physicalism and dualism*

2. Physicalist theories of consciousness and intentionality

- Consciousness
 - finding the neural correlate of consciousness
 - closing the explanatory gap
- Intentionality (mental representation)
 - identifying the causal basis of intentionality
 - explaining its causal basis in biological terms

Neural correlate of consciousness

- We cannot find the neural correlate of X unless we have some idea of what X is
- Is consciousness the same thing in thought and visual perception?
- But we already know that visual perception and thought are processed in different parts of the brain
- So what does this imply about their neural correlates?

Intentionality

- The starting point for causal theories of intentionality: the causal relation between intentional states and their objects
(See Jerry Fodor, *Psychosemantics*, Fred Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*)
- The hope is that the intentional relation ('aboutness') can be understood in causal, and therefore ultimately in physical terms

The problem of intentionality

- But what if intentionality is not a relation? What if it is possible (e.g.) to think about something that does not exist, and therefore not stand in a relationship to it?
- We need an understanding of this phenomenon before we embark on a causal analysis of intentionality

The moral

- Phenomenology must precede metaphysics!
- (Phenomenology = an 'ology' of the phenomena)

3. Consciousness: preliminaries

- Distinguish phenomena of consciousness from theories of consciousness
- The theories are what explain the phenomena

Consciousness: etymology

- *Conscious* comes from the Latin:
con (with) + *scire* (to know)
- Originally: *knowing, being privy to*
- Hence: *conscius*, knowing with [others]
- Link to the idea of conscience — in Romance languages, the same word translates ‘conscious’ and ‘conscience’

Consciousness: etymology ctd.

- The use of the word to mean *aware* or *awake* is a later development in English (18th or 19th century)
- But the epistemic connotations of consciousness continue into some theories of consciousness, as we shall see

Some familiar philosophical definitions

- 'What it's like'
- The phenomenal
- Awareness
- The qualitative
- Qualia

‘What it’s like’

- Thomas Nagel (1974): a creature is conscious when there is something it is like to be that creature
- 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: he does not mean ‘what does being a bat resemble?’. We know many answers to this question
- Rather he means ‘what it *feels* like’

Definitions

- This means ‘what it is like’ or ‘something it is like’ cannot be used to *define* consciousness — in the sense of explaining its meaning to someone who did not know what it means
- If you did not know what ‘feels’ means, you would not know what ‘what it’s like’ means

Phenomenal

- 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

The extent of the phenomenal

- In this sense, feelings (pains and other sensations, emotional episodes), perceptual experiences, episodes of thinking and imagining are all phenomenally conscious episodes
- The 'phenomenal' should not be restricted to the sensory