Part 1a, Paper 1 Metaphysics | Lent 2017

Mind and Matter

Lecture 4: The problem of consciousness

1. Phenomenology, Qualia, etc.

Consciousness can be elusive to describe. 'Consciousness' and 'awareness' are often used in roughly the same way by philosophers and psychologists; but thereafter all agreement tends to end. We need to distinguish clearly: (a) the phenomenon of consciousness, and (b) theories about consciousness.

What it is like: Thomas Nagel writes that "fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism—something it is like for the organism". (436)

What does 'what it is like' (and invented substantives like 'what-it's-likeness') mean? The phrase 'what x is like' can be used in a comparative way (what x resembles). But this is clearly not what Nagel means. When he asks, 'what is it like to be a bat?' he means the phrase in the sense 'what it feels like'.

Nagel doesn't propose it as a definition of 'consciousness'; it would mean defining consciousness in terms of a feeling (a conscious state).

Phenomenal: The term 'phenomenal' comes from the Greek word for appearance (*phainómenon*). So 'phenomenal' literally means, pertaining to appearance. We use the verb 'to appear' in different ways. "Helen appeared at the reception", "The tomato appears red", "There appears to be a fire". But if things appear or seem some way *to someone*, then there is phenomenal consciousness.

Using the word 'phenomenal' does not commit you to one theory or another. But note that some writers, e.g. Ned Block, use 'phenomenal' to pick out a specific variety of consciousness. (See his '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 smelling coffee, the experience of a rose, etc. It is not necessary to think of the problem of consciousness as a problem about 'qualia'.

2. The Explanatory Gap

Nagel argues 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, we would not thereby know what it was like to be a bat. So there is something incomplete about the physicalist picture of our knowledge of the world.

Nagel isn't saying that physicalism 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 (see Levine 'Materialism and qualia'). It doesn't follow that the mind is not physical; an explanatory gap is one thing, an 'ontological' gap is another.

3. The Knowledge Argument

Jackson's argument relies on the coherence of a thought experiment: Mary in a black-and-white room:, she knows all there is to know about the physics, physiology (etc.) of colour, yet has never seen red. Then she sees red for the first time. Assuming this story, the argument goes:

1. Mary knows all the physical facts about colour in the room
2. Mary comes to learn something new when she sees red for the first time
3. What Mary learns is a fact

Therefore, not all facts are physical facts.

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 that a blindfolded person can know the whole of physics (see Russell *The Analysis of Matter* 1927).

The second premise: some argue that Mary does not learn anything new, but rather only comes to gain a new way of representing what she knew already. But how should we understand her sudden experience of red as just a new way of being presented with a fact she already knew?

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 only gains a new 'ability'—she learns how to recognise, imagine, or remember red things. (But when someone acquires an ability to do X, does it follow that they do not learn any facts about X?)

Others say that she gains only 'knowledge by acquaintance': she knew all the facts *about* redness, but now comes to know redness—in a way that you can come to know a person or a place.

If the argument is sound, does it refute physicalism?

4. EXTRA: The Conceivability Argument

The conceivability argument against physicalism is another popular, but different way, of undermining the physicalist picture. This is a development of Descartes's argument in the 6th Meditation, for the 'real distinction' between mind and body.

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 (a first-person perspective, in Nagel's sense). The argument:

1. Zombies are conceivable
2. What is conceivable is possible
3. Zombies are possible
4. If Zombies are possible, physicalism is false
5. Therefore, physicalism is false.

Notice, this argument also seems to apply to non-reductive physicalism. It purport to show that the physical facts do not determine our mental facts, because there could be a world with those physical facts that lack those mental facts. But are zombies in fact conceivable? (How do we settle a question like that?)

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