DUALISM & FUNCTIONALISM | Lent 2019 | Maarten Steenhagen (ms2416)
http://msteenhagen.github.io/teaching/2019dua/

Lecture 4: **Phenomenal consciousness**

Frank Jackson (1982), 'Epiphenomenal Qualia', *Philosophical Quarterly* 32, pp. 127-36.

Two types of physicalism

Physicalism can be defended as an ontologically reductive thesis. In this form it assumes an identity relation between mental phenomena and physical phenomena. For the purposes of discussion, let's construe this in terms of *facts*. The ontologically reductive physicalist says that every mental fact *is* a physical fact.

But there is a weaker form of physicalism which rejects the ontological reducibility of the mental. You can think here of a property dualism, which allows that not all facts are physical facts. This weaker form of physicalism is sometimes called 'supervenience physicalism' (the mental supervenes on the physical). It says that all is determined by the physical: any world which is a minimal physical duplicate of this world is a duplicate in every respect ('a duplicate *simpliciter*').

Duplicating the physical facts of the actual world entails duplicating all the facts about the actual world. This does not mean that all the facts about the actual world are physical facts. It means that any non-physical facts in the actual world are wholly determined by the physical facts in the actual world. (Keep in mind, this makes the dependence of the mental on the physical a contingent claim.)

Phenomenal consciousness

Consciousness can be elusive to describe. But it seems hard to deny its reality. So what can or should a physicalist say about it? In 'What is it like to be a bat?' Thomas Nagel argues that consciousness presents physicalism with an insurmountable problem:

> Without consciousness the mind-body problem would be much less interesting. With consciousness it seems hopeless. The most important and characteristic feature of conscious mental phenomena is very poorly understood. Most reductionist theories do not even try to explain it. And careful examination will show that no currently available concept of reduction is applicable to it. Perhaps a new theoretical form can be devised for the purpose, but such a solution, if it exists, lies in the distant intellectual future.

Nagel takes it to be obvious that "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" (p. 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 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).

Perhaps there are conscious states that do not entail that there is something it is like to be in those states. Sometimes 'conscious' is used in the sense of 'knows', e.g. "I am conscious of the risks". Some writers, e.g. Ned Block, use 'phenomenal' to pick out the specific variety of consciousness Nagel is concerned with. (See Block's 'On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness'). So keep in mind that Nagel is concerned with *phenomenal* consciousness.

Sometimes phenomenal consciousness is associated with *qualia*. Typically, this term is used to refer to intrinsic qualitative properties of experience. This presupposes that experiences themselves have qualitative properties. It is not necessary to think of the problem of consciousness as a problem about qualia, in part because it is not necessary to think that experiences themselves have qualitative properties. (This is often discussed as the 'transparency' of experience.)

The explanatory gap

Nagel argues that (i) a bat is conscious, so there is something it is like to be a bat; but (ii) 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. There is something physical theory cannot explain.

Does this mean that physicalism is false? No. But it means that if physicalism were true, we would not be able to understand it as a picture of our world. 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 (the term 'explanatory gap' is Levine's, see his 'Materialism and qualia'). It doesn't follow that the mind is not physical; an explanatory gap is one thing, an ontological gap is another.

The knowledge argument

In light of the previous, you should critically analyse the Knowledge Argument. The argument is proposed by Frank Jackson ('Epiphenomenal Qualia'), and it relies on the coherence of a thought experiment. Mary grows up 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. The argument goes as follows:

Knowledge Argument

1. Mary already knew all the physical facts
2. Mary comes to learn something new
3. What Mary learns is a fact

∴ So not all facts are physical facts

There are standard responses to reject each of the premises.

The first premise:
Some assume 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). So Mary could not have known all the physical facts in her room.

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. This is often referred to as the 'phenomenal concept' response. However, it is perhaps not clear we can say of her sudden experience of red as just a new way of being presented with a fact she already knew. Alternatively, we can assume that if Mary really knew all physical facts, she would know what it's like to see red.

The third premise:
Some dispute the third premise, and say that Mary does learn something new, but it is not a fact. Lewis in 'What Experience Teaches' says that she only gains a new 'ability'—she learns how to recognise, imagine, or remember red things. (But do ask yourself: 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. (How similar is this to the phenomenal concept response?)

If the Knowledge Argument is an argument against physicalism, then physicalism must be the thesis that all facts are physical facts. But we can now see that this is ambiguous:

(A) It can be read as an ontologically reductive claim: all facts are physical facts, i.e. there are only physical facts.

(B) Yet it is also compatible with a weaker form of physicalism if we read it as a claim about explanatory (or theoretical) reduction: all facts are physical facts, i.e. all facts can be explained in physical terms.

It seems that the knowledge argument successfully targets both versions of the claim that all facts are physical facts. Does the knowledge argument hereby undermine supervenience physicalism?

APPENDIX

The Conceivability Argument

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

The contemporary version of the argument is best formulated by David Chalmers (e.g. in 'Consciousness and its place in nature'). It relies on the idea of a zombie, a creature physically indistinguishable from you or me but lacking phenomenal consciousness (a first-person perspective, in Nagel's sense).

The argument:

1. Zombies are conceivable
2. What is conceivable is possible
3. Hence, zombies are possible (1,2)
4. If Zombies are possible, physicalism is false

$\therefore$ Therefore, physicalism is false (3,4)

The first two premises are straightforward and so is the inference to the third. The fourth premise deserves elaboration.

Consider first that a zombie is just a 'minimal physical duplicate' of you. If supervenience physicalism is true, you would expect that what holds for entire worlds also holds for parts of those worlds. So just as necessarily a minimal physical duplicate of the actual world is a duplicate simpliciter, supervenience physicalism seems to imply that necessarily a minimal physical duplicate of you is a duplicate simpliciter. However, a zombie is a minimal physical duplicate of you that is not a duplicate simpliciter. You have phenomenally conscious states the zombie lacks. Hence, if zombies are possible, physicalism is false (P4).

The Conceivability Argument undermines supervenience physicalism directly. 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.

You should look at this argument critically. Are zombies in fact conceivable? Should we accept that what is conceivable is possible? Is the jump from duplicate worlds to duplicate bodies (parts of worlds) really innocent?