

## Chapter 5

### SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND EXTERNAL WORLD<sup>1</sup>

*Gaps and Bridges*

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There is an important epistemological gap in the road from our subjective experiences to the external world. It is very difficult to understand how it is possible to get knowledge of an external world, especially if we accept that all our experiences can be conceived as remaining the same through drastic changes in that external world. Moreover, according to some radical versions of skepticism we cannot even know whether there is such an external world. Also, there is an important, let us say, ontological gap in the road from the external world to our subjective experiences. We do not understand very well how it is possible for some parts of the external world —our bodies, brains, etc.— to bring about subjective experiences, especially if we accept that the external world can be conceived as remaining the same through drastic changes in our subjective experience. Moreover, according to eliminativism it is perfectly possible that subjective experience does not exist at all. The epistemological gap and the ontological gap have puzzled

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many philosophers.<sup>2</sup> My purpose here is to explore some connections between both gaps in the hope that an analysis of their relationships can give us some clues to bridge them.

In order to analyze what I am calling the epistemological gap and the ontological gap, it will be very important to make clear what is involved in them. This will be done in sections 1, 2 and 3. Then, in section 4, I will emphasize a quite simple but crucial dependence between both gaps. In a nutshell, to take seriously the ontological gap entails that we have been able to bridge, in some way or other, the epistemological gap. At this point, there would be two possible ways to explain how, in that case, we are in fact able to be in epistemic touch with the external world. Representationalism offers one of those possible ways. The other way is offered by some kind of direct realism. Representationalism is the more common option. However, the epistemological gap is supported by certain possibility of conceiving changes in the external world without any change in our subjective experiences. And representationalism never has had the enough modal force to exclude that possibility of conceiving. In sections 5, 6 and 7, I explore the other option, a kind of direct realism. With the aim of providing a strategy to limit the conceivability involved in the epistemological gap, I will introduce some concepts such as those of "knowing a sample," "knowing through samples," "indexical actualization of dispositional properties" and "typical subjective experiences." To take seriously the ontological gap would entail that we be able to know samples of typical subjective experiences actualizing certain dispositional properties of the external world, not being possible to conceive changes in the actualizations of those dispositions without changes in our subjective experiences. This would offer a very strong non representationalist explanation of how we are able to bridge the epistemological gap assuming that we take seriously the ontological gap. Finally, in sections 8 and 9, I will assess the extent to which the same explanatory strategy could be successfully applied to the ontological gap itself.

<sup>2</sup> For recent work concerning the epistemological gap, see McDowell (1994), Stroud (1984), Stroud (2000), and Williams (1978). With respect to the ontological gap, see Chalmers (1996), Jackson (1983), Levine (1983), Levine (1993), McGinn (1991), Nagel (1979), and Tye (1996). For some connections among both gaps, quite close to the approach that will be defended in the paper, see Putnam (1994 and 1999).

## 1. THE CONCEPT OF SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND THE CONCEPT OF EXTERNAL WORLD

Let us begin making clear the concept of subjective experience and the concept of external world.

- By "*subjective experience*" I understand mental states with a qualitative content of which we are conscious, being the sort of consciousness relevant here, what sometimes is called "phenomenal consciousness" or the consciousness from "the first person point of view".
- By "*external world*" I understand everything that exists but we do not reflectively recognize as being part of our subjective experiences. The external world is sometimes also called "the objective world" or the world from "the third person point of view".

Some points must be noted in relation to the above characterizations. The first one concerns the concept of external world we have just introduced. That concept is very *generic*. Beyond the claim that there exists an external world, there is no qualification indicating the peculiar ways the external world can be. However it is possible to elaborate other concepts of external world which are not so generic. In fact, we can have many sorts of propositional attitudes *about* the external world, i. e., propositional attitudes about what exists beyond what we can find reflectively as being part of our subjective experience. For instance, we can have beliefs about the *nature* of the external world. This would offer more *enriched* concepts of the external world. Moreover, as we know, these more enriched concepts of the external world can be of an indefinite variety. We can conceive the external world in a narrow physicalistic way, or we can conceive it as containing colours, sounds, and other so called "secondary qualities," or we can conceive the external world, as Berkeley did, as containing only souls and a God, etc. These would be very different enriched concepts of the external world.

I would like to note two other points. One of them has to do with the contents of subjective experiences. In principle, we could have subjective experiences *of* the external world. Our concept of external world does not exclude that possibility. That the external world is what exists beyond what we can find reflectively as being part of our experiences does not entail our not having experiences *of* that external world. To have experiences *of* the external world would be simply to have experiences *of* what exists beyond what we can find reflectively as being part of our subjective experiences.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This is not a mere verbal trick, but a definitory feature of intentionality. In exactly the same sense, we can say, for example, that a book about New York is a book which says certain things *of* New York without being New York, in any interesting sense, *part of* the book.

The other point has to do with our competence to grasp and use the concept of subjective experience, the generic concept of an external world and any enriched concept of that external world. The concept of subjective experience is less demanding than the generic concept of an external world, and that generic concept is much less demanding than other, more enriched concepts. Having the concept of subjective experience requires no more than having the concept of a mental state with a qualitative content of which we are conscious. In contrast with that, having the generic concept of external world requires a certain *reflective* move towards what we can find in our subjective experiences. Moreover, to use the generic concept of external world requires that we are able to claim the existence of something beyond those experiences. Finally, to be able to claim that we have experiences of an external world such as it is conceptualized in our propositional attitudes—for instance, in our beliefs—, i.e., to use any enriched concept of external world, requires another *much more reflective* move than simply to be able to claim that there is something that exists beyond what we can find reflectively as being part of our subjective experiences. It demands that it be conceptualized in certain specific ways.

A consequence of the last remarks is that even if we find good reasons to claim that we have experiences of the external world, we cannot directly take those subjective experiences as being experiences of the external world such as it is conceptualized in our propositional attitudes—for instance, in our beliefs—. In order to achieve this second epistemic position, other reasons would be needed.

## 2. TWO GAPS

As we have said, there would be two important gaps between the external world and our subjective experience. One of those gaps would have an epistemological character; the other one would be ontological. Let us define them in more precise terms:

The epistemological gap (hereafter, EG) would arise from the problem of knowing the external world given that

- (A) it always seems possible to conceive our subjective experience as remaining the same through many kinds of changes in the external world.

EG is directly connected with the classical problem of skepticism about the external world and with problems involving “brains in a vat”, etc. EG would put in difficulty our more common conceptions about the *nature* of

the external world, even the very *existence* of any external world in some radical skeptical versions accepting not only thesis A but also that

- (A') it always seems possible to conceive our subjective experience as remaining the same even though there does not exist any external world at all.

Being A' the case, then our concept of the external world would be in danger of becoming vacuous —a concept with a very problematic application, or with no application—. It would be possible to eliminate the external world without any change in our subjective experiences. Moreover, it is possible that, in fact, there is not any external world.

*The ontological gap* (hereafter, OG), on the other hand, would arise from the problem of understanding how the external world —specially those parts of the external world constituted by our brains and bodies— can generate subjective experiences given that

- (B) it seems always possible to conceive the external world —especially our brains and bodies— as remaining the same through many kinds of changes in our subjective experience.

OG is directly related with the so-called mind-body problem, and also with problems involving “inverted qualia”, “philosophical zombies”, etc. OG would complicate our conceptions about the *ontological place* of subjective experience in the external world, even the very *existence* of our subjective experience in some radical eliminativist versions accepting not only thesis B but also that

- (B') it always seems possible to conceive the external world —especially our brains and bodies— as remaining the same even though there does not exist any subjective experience at all.

Being B' the case, it is now our concept of subjective experience which would be in danger of becoming vacuous. It would be possible to eliminate all subjective experiences without any change in the external world —in our brains and bodies—. Moreover, it is possible that, in fact, there are no subjective experiences at all.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Note that in order to accept B' it is not enough to be epiphenomenalist concerning subjective experiences. It would be plausible for epiphenomenalism to accept a certain supervenience thesis about the dependence of epiphenomenical properties on non-epiphenomenical ones, in the sense that to duplicate a world with respect to its non-epiphenomenical properties entails duplicating it with respect to its epiphenomenical properties. Now, if that entailment is understood as excluding the conceivability of duplicates with respect to non-epiphenomenical properties which are not duplicates with respect to epiphenomenical ones, then it is clear that epiphenomenalism would have to reject a thesis such as B'.

### 3. SOME STRUCTURAL SIMILARITIES BETWEEN BOTH GAPS

There are many structural similarities between EG and OG. Let us remark on some of them.

Firstly, both gaps go against what might be called the "natural", "intuitive", "ordinary", "common-sense", etc., epistemological and ontological positions according to which the external world is, more or less, such as we experience it and our subjective experiences have a quite secure ontological place in that world.

Secondly, both gaps create difficulties for that natural position without assuming a physicalist enriched concept of the external world, i.e., without taking for granted that the external world is the *physical* world. It is very important keeping in mind the force and scope of our gaps. EG and OG pose important philosophical problems which go beyond physicalism.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, theses A and A' are *symmetrical*, respectively, with theses B and B', in relation to the kind of covariation involved. In A and A', subjective experience remains untouched through changes in the external world. In B and B' what remains untouched is the external world through changes in subjective experience.

Fourthly, the important thesis of EG is A, and the important thesis of OG is B. Thesis A' entails A, and thesis B' entails B. However, the converses do not hold true. Because of that, in order to bridge EG and OG, it is not sufficient to argue, respectively, against A' and B'. It is necessary to confront A and B, and to argue against them.

Finally, theses A and A' of EG, and theses B and B' of OG, have the *strongest modal force*. They involve *conceivability*. Theses A and A' are compatible with the existence of an external world, in any enriched sense, and theses B and B' are compatible with the existence of subjective experiences. Moreover, using recent terminology, we could say that theses A and A' are compatible with the existence of "*natural*" —or nomic, or empirical— supervenience relations of the external world on our subjective experience, and that theses B and B' are compatible with the existence of such relations holding this time from our subjective experience to the external world. There could be supervenience relations both ways involving only a certain *subclass* of possible worlds —those possible worlds sharing

Hence, in order to accept B', it would be necessary to also maintain some sort of "modal" eliminativism about subjective experiences. Even if subjective experiences exist, it has to be possible for them to cease existing without any other change in the world.

<sup>5</sup> As it will become clear in the following sections, the strategy proposed in order to bridge both gaps would also go beyond physicalism.

the natural properties of our world, or being compatible with the laws of our world, or satisfying all the empirical regularities of our world—. However, the truth of A, A', B and B' would be incompatible with the existence of “logical”—or conceptual— supervenience relations involving *all* possible worlds. The truth of A, A', B and B' requires at least a conceivable possible world satisfying what they say. But if there are “logical” supervenience relations of the external world on our subjective experience, then there cannot be any such world with respect to A and A'. And if there are “logical” supervenience relations of our subjective experience on the external world, then there cannot be any such world with respect to B and B'.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. A VERY SIMPLE, BUT CRUCIAL, DEPENDENCE

In any case there are not only similarities between EG and OG. No less important than the similarities above mentioned is the following kind of dependence:

- To take OG seriously entails our being able to bridge, in some way or another, EG.

To take OG seriously would be to take it as creating a genuine problem about the place of subjective experiences in the external world. This *presupposes* that in fact we have been able to know that there is an external world, and it *presupposes* that in fact we have been able to know something about that external world. OG only makes sense from that epistemic background.

Let us consider, for instance, the mind-body problem —the most important problem linked to OG—. If we did not presuppose that there is an external world, which is not part of our subjective experiences, and if we did

<sup>6</sup> We can assume for simplicity the concept of “strong supervenience” proposed by J. Kim, or may be his concept of “strong supervenience for coordinated multiple domains”. See Kim (1993). However, nothing in our analysis will depend on that assumption. In contrast, the distinction between “natural” supervenience relations and “logical” ones would be very important in what follows. Also, it is very important in the approaches of Chalmers (1996) and Jackson (1982). Chalmers (1996:34-38) offers the following explanation of the distinction: “B-properties supervene logically on A-properties if no two *logically possible* situations are identical with respect to their A-properties but distinct with respect to their B-properties. (...) Natural supervenience holds when, among all naturally possible situations, those with the same distribution of A-properties have the same distribution of B-properties: that is, when the A-facts about a situation *naturally necessitate* the B-facts. (...) This co-occurrence need not hold in every logically possible situation, but it must hold in every naturally possible situation. (...) It is clear that logical supervenience implies natural supervenience. (...) The reverse does not hold, however (...)"

not presuppose that we know a number of things about the nature of that external world, then we would not have a genuine mind-body problem. We would have only a, let us say, "imaginary" mind-body problem, not a genuine one. In order to have a genuine mind-body problem, we have to know many things about the composition, structure and dynamics of our bodies and brains as entities of the external world, and we have to wonder how our subjective experiences can be generated from all of that. OG only makes full sense if knowledge of that kind is taken as given.

Being serious about OG, and taking it as creating a genuine problem, entails that in some way or other *we have been able to bridge EG* and, hence, that we have been able to reject theses A and A'. This kind of dependence is quite simple and obvious. Up to a certain extent, it is also a *trivial* fact. However, that fact will have a crucial importance in what follows.

## 5. HOW ARE WE ABLE TO BRIDGE EG ASSUMING THAT WE TAKE OG AS CREATING A GENUINE PROBLEM?

Now, I want to pose the following question: How are we able to bridge EG assuming that we take OG as creating a genuine problem?

The situation is the following one. We are serious about OG. We take it as creating a genuine problem. Hence, we have been able to bridge EG. Hence, we have been able to reject both A and A'. The problem is: *How have we been able to do it?*

It is important to stress once again that we are assuming that we take OG seriously. It is only through that supposition that we can try to explain how we are able to reject theses A and A' of EG. First, we will discuss how we are able to reject thesis A'. Then, we will discuss how we are able to reject thesis A. Let us begin with thesis A'.

How are we able to reject A'? It is clear that if our *generic* concept of external world could not be a vacuous concept when we take OG seriously, then thesis A' could be rejected. Now, can our generic concept of an external world be a vacuous concept in that situation? The answer is negative. If we take OG seriously, then we are presupposing that our generic concept of the external world *cannot* be vacuous. If we take OG seriously, then we are assuming that an external world exists. But not only that: because we are worried about how to understand our subjective experience in that external world, we are assuming that our subjective experience *would not be the same* if there were not such an external world.

Given that we are serious about OG, there would be no need to appeal to any sort of sophisticated transcendental argument<sup>7</sup> in order to reject thesis A'. It would be enough to note that when we take OG as creating a genuine problem, we are assuming that there *must* be something beyond what we can find reflectively as being part of our subjective experiences.

That way, we could buy a cheap "logical" supervenience of the external world, understood in a generic sense, on our subjective experience. We could not conceive changes in the external world, understood in that generic sense, without changes with respect to the existence or non-existence of our subjective experience as a whole. If the external world in that generic sense were to change, then our subjective experience would cease existing too. However, the generic concept of an external world is only a concept referring to what exists beyond what we can find reflectively as being part of our subjective experiences. So, the only variation admissible in the external world so understood would be also a variation of *existence*. The external world understood in that generic sense only can exist or it can cease existing.

In other words, the non vacuous character of the generic concept of external world involved in our acceptance of OG would make us able to reject A'. But it would offer no help in relation to thesis A. In order to reject A, we need to make use of other *more enriched concepts* of external world.

Now, it is time to ask *how we are able to reject thesis A*. We must recall again that our problem is not whether we can reject A. By assumption, we take OG as creating a genuine problem. Therefore, we have to be able to reject not only A' but also A. Thus, the real problem is not whether we can do it. The real problem is one of *explaining how we are able to do it*.

In order to explain how we can reject A, there would be two open options:

1. representationalism, or
2. some kind of direct realism.

Certainly, representationalism is the more common option in order to bridge EG. It appeals to the existence of representations playing the role of unavoidable *intermediaries* between the external world and our subjective experiences. However, no representationalist position can achieve the modal force able to exclude A. It is always possible to *conceive* variations in the nature of the external world without any variation in our mental representations. By themselves, representations are not able to maintain any "logical" relation with what they represent.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Transcendental arguments as those that are analyzed and criticized by Stroud (1984).

<sup>8</sup> Locke is one of the classical sources for representationalism. The mind would always work on representations or "ideas" of the things that we perceive or think about. As we know, in recent cognitive science the analogy between minds and computers has promoted a serious revival of representationalism. Both minds —or brains— and computers manipulate

Then, let us explore another epistemological position close to what is traditionally known as *direct realism*.<sup>9</sup> Our main target is to look for certain epistemic situations in which we could achieve a "direct", non-representational connection between our subjective experiences and the external world, understood this time in a certain enriched sense, such that we *cannot conceive* changes in that enriched external world without changes in our subjective experiences.

The possibility of being in such epistemic situations entails that the conceivability present in A can sometimes be only an apparent conceivability: *we would not really conceive what it seems is conceived*. From the perspective offered by those epistemic situations, we have to be able to find an enriched concept of external world with enough modal force to go against the modal force of A.

## 6. INTRODUCING NEW CONCEPTS

I am trying to offer an explanation close to direct realism of how is it possible to reject thesis A, and so, of how we are able to bridge EG, given that we take OG seriously. First, however, it is necessary to introduce some new concepts. Let us begin with the notions of knowing a sample and knowing through samples:

*We know a sample of an x being F* =<sub>Def.</sub>

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symbols representing aspects of the world. See, for instance, Fodor (1987: p. 17). The crucial problem for both old and new versions of representationalism is to understand how the mind can escape from its world of representations and how representations can manage to acquire a content pointing beyond themselves. This was exactly the objection Berkeley posed to Locke. It is supposed that "ideas" in the mind represent something else, but the mind has no access to this "something else" except by forming other ideas. It is exactly that lack of access which gives substance to thesis A, i.e. the possibility of conceiving changes in the external world without any change in our subjective experiences.

<sup>9</sup> The most classic defender of something we could call "direct realism" was Aristotle. In his *De Anima*, for instance, we can read that in perception the soul takes on the form of the object perceived without its matter. Here, Aristotle appears to be identifying the properties of the perceived objects with some properties of the perceiving sense organs. The perception would be direct in the sense that no mental "messengers", no unavoidable mental intermediaries, have to be perceived or sensed in order to perceive the properties of the perceived objects. Austin (1962) is another indispensable reference for direct realism. Even though Austin himself says that this position would be "no less scholastic and erroneous than its antithesis"—see the end of Lecture I in Austin (1962)—, that remark has more to do with the notion of "material thing" than with the rejection of sense data as unavoidable epistemic intermediaries. More recently, Putnam (1994) has urged taking direct realism seriously as a promising way to face the problems generated by representationalism, both in the fields of perception and cognition.

1. we are able to identify an  $x$  being  $F$ , and
2. we cannot conceive a more successful, or clear, case of an  $x$  being  $F$ .

In other words, knowing a sample of an  $x$  being  $F$  would be to know an  $x$  being  $F$  in the most perfect way we can conceive it. From this notion of knowing a sample, we can define another related notion.

*We know through samples, or we know by samples, that  $y$  is  $F$*  =<sub>Def.</sub>

1. we know a sample of an  $x$  being  $F$ , and
2. we know that  $y$  is relevantly similar to  $x$ .

Knowing a sample of an  $x$  being  $F$  would be a special case of knowing *through samples* that  $x$  is  $F$ . It would be that special case in which  $x$  is identical to  $y$ . We will say that we know *merely through samples*, or that we know merely by samples, in all the other cases where which  $x$  is not identical to  $y$ .

Our epistemic life is really full of knowledge through samples. Some simple instances are the following ones: knowing that something is a token of a certain word or sentence, knowing that something is the flag of the Basque Country, knowing that some object in the sky is an airplane, knowing that something has the same white colour as my shirt, etc. In all of these cases, our knowledge through samples entails 1) that we know samples of the word or sentence in question, that we know samples of the flag of the Basque Country, that we know samples of airplanes, that we know samples of things having a white colour, etc., and 2) that we know that the former things we claim to know are relevantly similar to those things of which some samples are known.

We can be wrong when we claim that we know merely through samples that something is  $F$ . Also, we can be wrong when we claim that we know a sample of an  $x$  being  $F$ . However, if we really know a sample of an  $x$  being  $F$ , then we cannot be wrong and we cannot conceive that we can be wrong. Moreover, the —of course, fallible— test to determine if we really know a sample of  $x$  being  $F$  is to try to conceive more successful cases of an  $x$  being  $F$ . If we can do it, then our knowledge was not knowledge of a sample of an  $x$  being  $F$ .

Another important notion I want to introduce is the following one:

A set of properties  $G=\{G_i, G_j, \dots, G_k\}$  actualizes indexically a set of dispositional properties  $H=\{H_i, H_j, \dots, H_k\}$  in certain particular circumstances  $C$  =<sub>Def.</sub>

1. in circumstances  $C$ , some properties belonging to  $G$  are exemplified,
2.  $H'=\{H'i, H'j, \dots, H'k\}$  is the set of non-dispositional properties associated to dispositional properties  $H$  as the properties that, being exemplified, would constitute their actualizations, and

### 3. $H'$ logically supervenes on $G$ in the circumstances $C$ .<sup>10</sup>

The non-dispositional properties  $H'$  are the properties that would constitute the actualizations of properties  $H$ . They would be exemplified when the dispositions  $H$  are performed. Let us call them the “actualizers” of  $H$ . For instance, the dispositional property “to be able to be dissolved in water” would have the property of “being dissolved in water” as its actualizer, the dispositional property “to be able to have a red colour” would have the property “having a red colour” as its actualizer, and so on. To exemplify one of the properties  $H'$  would be to actualize one of the dispositions  $H$ . This is the conception of actualizing a dispositional property we are adopting. Dispositional properties have other non-dispositional properties as their actualizers, and to actualize a dispositional property is to exemplify its associated actualizer.

We are assuming that dispositional properties can be exemplified without being actualized, i.e. without being exemplified the associated non-dispositional properties which are their actualizers. It is possible, for instance, that something is able to be dissolved in water without being never dissolved in water, and that something is able to have a red colour without ever having a red colour. Also, we will assume that to exemplify any non-dispositional property able to be the actualizer of a dispositional property entails exemplifying that dispositional property. For instance, being dissolved in water entails to be able to be dissolved in water, to have a red colour entails to be able to have that colour, etc.

The important idea underlying the notion of indexical actualization is that, in certain circumstances  $C$ , some properties  $G$  get to have a “logical” connection with the set of actualizers  $H'$  of some dispositional properties  $H$ , being supervenience relations the way in which such “logical” connection is articulated. To exemplify properties  $G$  in the circumstances  $C$  satisfies a *logically sufficient condition* for the exemplification of some of the non-dispositional correlates  $H'$  actualizing some of the properties  $H$ . That connection would be “logical” in the sense that there is no possible world we could *conceive* in which the circumstances  $C$  hold, and the condition of exemplifying  $G$  in  $C$  is satisfied, but the non-dispositional correlates  $H'$  actualizing the relevant dispositional properties  $H$  are not exemplified.

<sup>10</sup> Again, we can assume here Kim’s concept of strong supervenience and the distinction between “logical” and “empirical” supervenience above mentioned.

## 7. COMING BACK TO THE REJECTION OF THESIS A

With the help of the concepts just introduced, we can propose now an *explanation* of how are we able to reject A, and hence EG, given that we have taken OG seriously. The explanation would be constituted by the following steps:

1. First, we define the notion of typical subjective experiences:

*A certain subjective experience would be typical* =<sub>Def.</sub> with respect to the circumstances in which the experience takes place, our reflection cannot but suppose a relation of *indexical actualization* between certain properties of the experience (for instance, "having a visual experience including a red colour in its qualitative content") and certain dispositional properties of the external world (for instance, "to be able to have a red colour").<sup>11</sup>

2. Now, the explanation would state that if we take OG seriously, then *we have to know samples of typical subjective experiences*.

If we take OG seriously, then we have to be able to identify typical subjective experiences. We have to be able to identify circumstances in which our subjective experiences indexically actualize certain dispositional properties of the external world. There would be dispositional properties in the external world such that their actualizations in those circumstances "logically" supervene on certain subjective properties.

Moreover, if we take OG seriously, then not only do we have to be able to identify typical subjective experiences but we have to be able to identify them without being able to conceive more successful, or clearer, cases of them. In other words, we have to know samples of subjective experiences.

<sup>11</sup> The concept of a typical subjective experience is the —we could say, Kantian— concept of a "*pure receptivity*" with respect to a dispositional part of the external world in certain circumstances. That state would be an epistemic state completely opposite to the Cartesian state of "doubt", and it would be also opposite to the Husserlian state of an "*epoje*". Up to a point, it would be similar to the epistemic state of Moore in front of his two hands. And it would be quite similar to the epistemic states described by Austin when, for instance, looking at an apple, and everything going right in our eyes, and the light being normal, and being placed neither too close nor too far from the apple, etc., we see it with a red colour. Note, however, that the enriched concept of the external world involved in a typical subjective experience would only be dispositional.

3. But, to know samples of typical subjective experiences entails that *we cannot conceive any failure in the "logical" supervenience* of certain non-dispositional properties of the external world (properties such as, for instance, "having a red colour") on certain properties of our subjective experience (properties like, for instance, "having a visual experience including a red colour in its qualitative content"), where the former kind of properties would actualize certain dispositional properties of that external world.

In other words, to know samples of typical subjective experiences entails that having those experiences in the circumstances satisfies a "*logically sufficient condition*" for the exemplification of certain non-dispositional properties of the external world actualizing certain dispositional properties.

This is what offers a full explanation of how we are able to reject thesis A, and therefore of how we can reject EG, given that we take OG seriously. To take OG seriously entails our knowing samples of typical subjective experiences. We know samples in which the actualizations of some dispositional properties of the external world in certain circumstances supervene on our subjective experiences. The fact that we have here a knowledge of samples entails that we cannot conceive more successful, or clearer, cases satisfying that description. And the fact that in those samples our subjective experiences are actualizing indexically certain dispositional properties of the external world entails our not conceiving any failure in the "*logical*" supervenience of the actualizers of those dispositional properties on our subjective experiences. In a nutshell, we cannot conceive more clear cases of an epistemic situation in which we cannot conceive failures in that "*logical*" supervenience. This double move is what makes possible it to resist the modal force of A and, hence, a way to bridge EG.

4. Now, our explanation could continue claiming that, with respect to many subjective experiences, we can *know through samples* whether they are typical or not. We would know whether those subjective experiences are or are not relevantly similar to some of the cases in which we know samples of typical subjective experiences.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> That way, we could distinguish genuine claims of being experiencing the external world from cases in which we could say that we are merely dreaming, imagining, having a illusion, etc.

In the circumstances involved in our knowing samples of typical subjective experiences, we cannot really conceive the variations involved in A. We cannot really conceive those variations with respect to *an enriched concept of the external world as consisting in a set of "dispositions", "potentialities" or "powers"* which can be indexically actualized by our subjective experiences. That enriched concept of an external world would make us able to reject A, and to bridge EG, given that we have a genuine problem with OG.

So, there are circumstances in which we can not conceive that our subjective experiences are not—"direct"—experiences of the external world, understood in a special way. A very important consequence of our explanation would be that, in some circumstances, the conceivability present in A has only to be an *apparent conceivability*. In what circumstances would this happen? At least, in all those circumstances in which we are facing a genuine problem concerning OG.

Let us emphasize the last point. The modal force that makes OG a serious and genuine problem in certain circumstances is transmitted to the samples of typical subjective experiences we can know in those circumstances. In consequence, all conceivability involved in the thesis A of EG has to become an apparent conceivability when we try to formulate EG in those circumstances!

The explanation given of how to reject thesis A is really very close to direct realism. Moreover, the motivation to introduce dispositions as the basic materials of our enriched concept of an external world is closely related with two well known objections to direct realism: *the objection of "naïveté"* and *Russell's objection*.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, it is easy to think of direct realism as being committed to the view that colours, sounds, etc., as perceived, are independently existing properties of objects, that the way things look or seem is exactly the way things are, even in the absence of perceivers to whom they appear that way. Direct realism is interpreted here as a "naïve" realism. On the other hand, what we have called "*Russell's objection*" is the problem of choosing the real colour, sound, etc., of an object given that, from different perspectives and background conditions, we always perceive different colours, sounds, etc., or different nuances of a certain colour, sound, etc.

Our approach takes typical subjective experiences as actualizing indexically certain dispositional properties of the external world. That way, it can deal with both objections. The first objection could be blocked saying that the dispositional properties are not *the same properties* than the properties that would actualize them. We would not be committed to say that

<sup>13</sup> See Russell (1912).

colours, sounds, etc., as perceived are independent properties of objects in the external world. The relevant dispositional properties in the external world—for instance, “to be able to have a red colour”—could exist without having any actualization. But the actualization of those dispositional properties logically supervenes on subjective experiences—experiences such as “having a visual experience including a red colour in its qualitative content”—. Hence, in the absence of perceivers there would be no colour, sound, etc., such as they are perceived.

The second objection, Russell's objection, could be blocked maintaining that even though, as we have assumed, every actualized disposition entails a dispositional property in the object, there is no need to assume that every *different* actualized disposition, entails a *different* dispositional property. With respect to many dispositional properties, exactly the same dispositional property is able to have different actualizations in different circumstances of actualization. An example of this would be the case of an object with the dispositional property of “being able to have a red colour” appearing as having a black colour in the distance. Taking into consideration the distance, “having a black colour” could perfectly be an actualizer of the dispositional property “being able to have a red colour”. Our definition of indexical actualization tried to do justice to that intuition. The nuances in colours, sounds, etc., also would offer good examples of the importance of the circumstances of actualization. Properties like “having a metallic blue colour” and “having the blue colour of the sea” could be different actualizers of the dispositional property of “being able to have a blue colour” simply because the circumstances of actualization are different.<sup>14</sup> Hence, we could have different colours, sounds, etc., in different circumstances, and we could have different nuances of a certain colour, sound, etc., in different circumstances. Moreover, all of them could be assumed as being real. We would not need to choose because there is not any exclusion among them.

There is another important feature of our approach that must be noted. The fact that a subject knows samples of typical subjective experiences would have to be compatible with the fact that when the subject has one of those typical experiences, for instance, a visual experience including a red colour in its qualitative content, in the same circumstances and faced with the same objects, another subject can have typical experiences including, for instance, a green colour in its respective qualitative content. It is really very difficult to discard the intuition that some sort of “systematic inverted

<sup>14</sup> It may be convenient to note that our problem is not whether different properties can, let us say, “realize” a certain property which is the actualizer of a given dispositional property. Our problem is whether a dispositional property can have different actualizers, where the actualizer of a dispositional property is the property that would constitute the actualization of the disposition.

with that possibility. Is our direct realist approach able to make room for the existence of cases in which the qualitative fields of a subject, or of a number of subjects, are systematically inverted with respect to the qualitative fields of others? The answer is affirmative, and it will be important to see why.

Remember that in typical subjective experiences, there would be a relation of indexical actualization between certain properties of the experience and certain dispositional properties of the external world. This means that these dispositional properties would be associated with certain non-dispositional properties that, in the case of being exemplified, would actualize them, and that a certain set of these non-dispositional properties would logically supervene on a certain set of properties of our experience. That way, typical subjective experiences would achieve a logical connection with the actualizations of certain dispositional properties of the external world. The crucial point is that the relevant supervenience relation between, on the one hand, the set of properties that would actualize certain dispositional properties of the external world, the set of actualizers, and, on the other hand, the set of properties of our experience could be maintained in many ways. With respect to some subjects, circumstances and objects, the property of "having a red colour" could be related with the property of "having a subjective experience with a red colour in its qualitative content", whereas for other subjects, in just the *same* circumstances and with respect to the *same* objects, it could be the property of "having a green colour" what is related with the property of "having a subjective experience with a green colour in its qualitative content". The first kind of subjects would be actualizing, in the external world, the dispositional property of "being able to have a red colour", whereas the second kind of subjects, in just the same circumstances and with respect to the same objects, would be actualizing the dispositional property of "being able to have a green colour". But both cases could perfectly well be cases in which the subjects know samples of typical subjective experiences in exactly the same circumstances and with respect to exactly the same objects. The only thing that matters is the preservation of a "logical" supervenience relation between a certain set of actualizers, i.e., non dispositional properties actualizing certain dispositional properties of the external world, and a certain set of properties of our subjective experience. And this can be maintained through many different ways of connecting the members of those two sets of properties.

## 8. COULD WE APPLY THE SAME STRATEGY TO OG?

Given that we have taken OG seriously, we have sketched a *non-representationalist* explanation of how we have been able to bridge EG. According to that explanation, we know through samples that in some cases we have, let us say, *direct experiences of the external world*, those experiences consisting of actualizing indexically certain dispositional properties of that external world. That knowledge through samples in the circumstances in which we take OG seriously offered all that was needed in order to face the modal force of A.

Now, an important open question would be the following one: *Could we apply the same strategy in order to bridge OG?* In fact, an explanation analogous to the one given with respect to EG also could be given with respect to OG. The important point is that, in such an explanation, the role of "typical subjective experiences" would be played by the correlative notion of "*typical productions of subjective experiences*".

Let us introduce that notion in more precise terms. In typical productions of subjective experiences, there is a relation of *indexical actualization* of certain dispositional properties of our subjective experiences (for instance, "to be able to have a visual experience including a red colour in its qualitative content") by certain properties of our brains, or bodies, or bodies and environments, etc. (for instance, "having a certain neuronal activity"). Just as before, our strategy could state now that we would know *samples of typical productions of subjective experience*, and that with respect to many cases of production of subjective experiences we would know *through samples* whether they are typical or not.

However, now there is an important problem. In order to bridge EG, we were assuming that we were taking OG seriously. This was what made it possible for us to be in the epistemic situation of knowing samples of typical subjective experiences. Are there circumstances in which we are in a similar epistemic position with respect to OG itself? This is the crucial question.

In any case, if our strategy were successfully applied to OG, we could obtain very relevant consequences. For instance, we would not need any other "deeper" explanation or "deeper" theory in order to solve the mind-body problem. And we would neither need any kind of "*intermediaries*" — this time, not of a "representational" kind but of a, let us say, "causal" kind<sup>15</sup> — between our brains, our bodies, or our bodies and their

<sup>15</sup> Of course, many people would say that there is a blend of representational and causal features in both cases. From the "direct realist" perspective I am suggesting, there would

environments, etc., and the production of subjective experiences. We would not need any kind of "mechanism" having states of the external world as inputs and having subjective experiences as outputs. In other words, we will have something like an ontological "*direct realism*" with respect to the mind-body problem!

Our rejection of thesis A of EG did imply the existence of a "logical" *epistemological* covariation of the external world—in a certain enriched sense—with respect to our subjective experience. And, using the same strategy, the rejection of thesis B of OG would imply the existence of a "logical" *ontological* covariation of our subjective experience with respect to the external world—again, in a certain enriched sense. In sum, applying to OG the same strategy designed to deal with EG, we could obtain the following picture:

1. Certain properties of our subjective experience would indexically actualize some dispositional properties of the external world.
2. Certain properties of the external world—mainly, certain properties of those parts of the external world constituted by our bodies, brains, etc.—would indexically actualize some dispositional properties of our subjective experience.
3. And certain kinds of knowledge of samples and knowledge through samples would make us able to know those things.<sup>16</sup>

Is it possible to go a step further? Perhaps we could say that according to 1, our subjective experience would be able to *bring about* the exemplification of the actualizers of certain dispositional properties of the external world. Also, in a similar sense, perhaps we could say that according to 2, some parts of the external world would be able to *bring about* the exemplification of the actualizers of certain dispositional properties of our subjective experience. But, how can we understand what we mean here by "to bring about the exemplification"?

It is normal to assume that the only way to bring about the exemplification of a property is causal. Also, it is common to assume a certain "Humean" conception of causation entailing that, when there are causal relations, there must be laws covering those causal relations. This opens several alternatives. The way in which our actualizers are exemplified

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not be any need to assume those features in either of the two cases—at least, not is the usual way.

<sup>16</sup> Note the strong Aristotelian character of points 1 and 2. As we have said, Aristotle is the classical reference for the epistemological position known as "*direct realism*". Concerning the mind-body problem, he is also a classical reference for an ontological position claiming that there is a "substantial unity" between the mind and the body of a living organism. It would not be necessary to appeal to any kind of "intermediaries" either in the case of EG or in the case of OG.

could be causal or could be non causal, and there could be covering laws for those relations of exemplification or they could exist without any covering law. It must be noted that all of those alternatives would be compatible with our approach. However, the strong circumstantial or indexical nature of the exemplifications involved in 1 and 2 would suggest that, even if we assume their causal character, they would be very *singular* causal relations. Moreover, perhaps it would be necessary to postulate here the existence of singular causal relations *without* any covering law.

Many of the remarks made in relation to the direct realist strategy applied to bridge EG also could be made in relation to OG. For instance, we can recall the answer given to the objection of "naïveté". The answer was that even though the relevant dispositional properties could exist in the external world without having any actualization, every such actualization logically supervenes on subjective experiences. Hence, there would be no point in saying that, even in the absence of perceivers, the way things look is exactly the way things are. Now, with respect to OG, we could say that even though the relevant dispositional properties of subjective experience could exist without having any actualization, every such actualization logically supervenes on certain properties of the external world —mainly, of those parts of the external world constituted by our bodies, brains, etc.—.

Now, let us consider Russell's objection against direct realism. In relation to EG, the answer given to Russell's objection was that we can have different actualizers and different actualizations of the same dispositional property because the circumstances of actualización are different. In relation to OG, we could say something similar. The same dispositional property of subjective experience could have different actualizers and different actualizations because the circumstances of actualización are different.

Finally, as in the case of EG, we could have, in relation to OG, many different ways of adequately connecting the actualizers of dispositional properties of our subjective experience and the properties of the external world involved in our definitions. Here, the only thing that matters would be the preservation of a "logical" supervenience relation of a certain set of non-dispositional properties actualizing certain dispositions of subjective experience, a set of actualizers, and a certain set of properties of the external world —mainly, of those parts of the external world constituted by our bodies, brains, etc—.

## 9. WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF OUR RESULTS?

Our results do not prove that there are no gaps at all. They only try to prove that to take both gaps seriously at the same time is *self-destructive* and that, perhaps, it would be possible to bridge both gaps *in the same way*.

What we have tried to show is that to take OG seriously entails our being able to bridge EG, and that perhaps exactly the same strategy we can find in order to explain how we have been able to bridge EG also could successfully be applied to OG.

However, we cannot forget the following difference between the ways we have applied our strategy to EG and to OG. We have rejected the *modal force* of EG with the help of certain knowledge through samples of typical subjective experiences. And we have assumed that to take OG seriously supports the claim that in fact *we have* such knowledge. Also, certain knowledge through samples of typical productions of subjective experiences would allow us to face the modal force of OG. But, in sharp contrast with the former case, we have *no independent support* here for the claim that in fact we have such knowledge. So, the following question arises: *Do we have such knowledge?*

I will not give a brief answer to the last question. Instead, let us go back for a moment, and let us ask another question: *Are there other ways to face the gaps?* The answer to this second question is affirmative. There would be four main options:

1. We can consider that the kind of solution we have offered both to EG and to OG is not able to go beyond certain very restricted cases. For instance, it could be claimed that we can have certain knowledge of samples but not any other knowledge through samples.
2. Or we can consider that the kind of solution offered to EG does not apply to OG because in the second case we completely lack the relevant knowledge of samples.
3. Or we can consider that it makes no sense to face OG because there is no solution to EG, and that some kind of skepticism about the external world is the right epistemological position.
4. Or we can take the gaps in a not so serious way.

Is (4) a tenable position? How can we take the gaps in not so serious a way? The only rational way to do it would be to maintain that EG and OG do not pose genuine problems but only, let us say, "imaginary" ones. And this would involve, more or less explicitly, *coherentism* or *naturalization* with respect to EG, and *idealism* or *eliminativism* with respect to OG.

By coherentism, we can understand the large family of epistemological positions according to which our experiences cannot receive any control from the outside, so that in epistemology we do not have to take care of the

external world. Naturalization would be any project of naturalizing epistemology in a way more or less close to the one proposed by Quine. A consequence of this project would be that in epistemology we do not have to take care of subjective experiences. Idealism would be the ontological position according to which all reality is mental. Finally, eliminativism would be the ontological position according to which mental phenomena, such as they are commonly described, do not exist at all. Idealism would be the ontological correlate of coherentism, and eliminativism would be the ontological correlate of naturalization. The problem is that, in the end, all these positions would reject the very terms in which EG and OG are defined: the external world or the subjective experience. This is the price of option (4).

We have to note an important point related with eliminativism. In order to bridge EG, we have taken for granted that we were taking OG seriously. We interpreted that assumption as entailing that we have certain knowledge about our brains and bodies, and about other parts of the external world, and that we face the problem of understanding how all of that can generate our subjective experiences. From the supposition that we have this knowledge about our brains, bodies, etc., we postulated the existence of certain knowledge of samples of typical subjective experiences. In these cases, certain properties of our subjective experiences would indexically actualize certain dispositional properties of the external world through the exemplification of some of their actualizers. For instance, we could say that "having a visual experience including a red colour in its qualitative content" indexically actualizes, in the external world, the dispositional property of "being able to have a red colour" through the exemplification of the non-dispositional property of "having a red colour" as its actualizer. Here, the property of "having a red colour" is taken as being the actualizer of the dispositional property of "being able to have a red colour". This would be adequate if the knowledge included in our taking OG seriously involves properties like "having a red colour" as properties of brains, bodies and other parts of the external world. In fact, this is what we have assumed in all of our examples. Moreover, I would say that it is what we would have to assume when we take for granted the relevant knowledge in order to formulate something like the mind-body problem. However, that supposition is not necessary. It is possible to argue that properties like "having a red colour" are not properties of the external world. From that point of view, in the external world there would only be physical entities and physical properties in a narrow sense excluding properties like "having a red colour". Colours, sounds, etc., only would appear as forming part of properties of subjective experiences like "having a visual experience including a red colour in its qualitative content".

How would this new supposition affect to our strategy? The answer is that it would *not* affect it in any crucial way. Now, in order to bridge EG, the actualizers of properties like "being able to have a red colour" would be physical properties in a narrow sense. In typical subjective experiences, properties like "having a visual experience including a red colour in its qualitative content" would indexically actualize properties like "being able to have a red colour" through the exemplification of some physical properties. Properties like "having such and such physical features", in a narrow sense, would now be the actualizers of properties like "being able to have a red colour". To exemplify the first property would be to actualize the second one.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, this would not be eliminativist with respect to subjective experiences. It would be only a peculiar way of constructing a bridge over EG taking OG seriously.

What about (3)? It is also important to be clear about the price of this option. It follows from (3) that, against all appearances, we never get to face a *genuine problem* concerning (OG). We never get to face, for instance, a genuine mind-body problem. And the reason would be that in no case can we be sure of having a body, or a brain, etc., as something belonging to the external world. The external world, the objective world, the world from a third point of view, etc., is always beyond our epistemic powers.<sup>18</sup>

Now, if we consider that the price of options (3) and (4) is excessively high to be paid, then the options that remain are (1) and (2). At this point, we must realize that those options, together with the kind of, let us say, optimistic solution we have suggested both for (EG) and (OG), would form a *continuum*. At one extreme of that continuum our solution would be placed. At the other extreme, option (2) would be placed. Between both extremes option (1) would be placed.

Taking all of this into consideration, the interesting question is not whether the solution we have imported from EG to OG is correct or not. The really interesting question is this: How can we decide which of those positions in the continuum is the more adequate one? Moreover, could

<sup>17</sup> From that perspective, the colours we see, the sounds we hear, etc., would not be properties of macroscopical, ordinary objects, but properties actualizing certain dispositional properties of the physical world. At the beginning of the paper we said that EG and OG pose important problems largely independent of physicalism. The main part of the paper is devoted to proposing a way to bridge EG and OG which is committed to the view that there are macroscopical objects having properties like colours and sounds. Now, we have sketched a physicalistic way to bridge EG and OG which is not committed to that view.

<sup>18</sup> This is the position defended by Williams (1978), with the dramatic nuance that the generic concept of the external world and some enriched concepts of it—in his terminology, both would constitute the "absolute conception of the world"—would be essential components of our notion of knowledge.

different positions in the continuum happen to be more adequate ones with respect to different particular cases of our gaps?

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## Chapter 6

# THE EXPLANATORY RELEVANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PROPERTIES

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Worries about the causal efficacy of psychological properties are legion in recent philosophy of mind. Some of the sources of these worries are Davidson's anomalism, content externalism, the irreducibility of consciousness, causal-explanatory exclusion, and the structurally-based feature of functional properties. A good number of answers to these (epi)phenomenal challenges end up accepting either strongly reductive or strongly anti-naturalist positions.<sup>1</sup> Some of us, somewhat reluctantly, started to explore epiphenomenalism as a potential conclusion of some of these challenges.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will not discuss the sources of epiphenomenalist worries. My aim here is to explore whether epiphenomenalism, and in particular the kind of epiphenomenalism that I think results from some of the sources above, can make room for the explanatoriness of psychological properties (and, perhaps more generally, of other special science properties). As it can be suspected, the answer to that question will depend on our views about explanation. Explanatory pragmatism may have an easier time making causal inefficacy and explanatory relevance compatible. My general concern is, however, whether *realist* approaches to explanation can be compatibilist in this sense. In fact, the scope of this paper is slightly more limited: I try to show that the most compelling indirect and direct arguments

<sup>1</sup> Kim (1998) and Hasker (1999) are examples of these opposite reactions.

<sup>2</sup> More or less implicitly, Jackson & Pettit (1990), Chalmers (1996), Kim (1984), and perhaps Block (1990) and Segal & Sober (1991) have accepted versions of epiphenomenalism.