A posteriori (Type-B) Physicalism

PHIL451

readings

Katalin Balog, ‘Acquaintance and the mind-body problem’

Optional:

- Brian Loar, ‘Phenomenal States’ (*difficult*)
- David Chalmers, “Consciousness and Its Place in Nature,” §5
- Pär Sundström, “Phenomenal Concepts”

A posteriori physicalism

- Our representatives of a posteriori ('type-B') physicalist are Brian Loar and Katalin Balog.

- As physicalists, they hold that the physical truths necessitate the phenomenal truths. *(Loar is a reductive physicalist; hence, he holds that phenomenal properties are numerically identical with physical properties.)*
- As a posteriori physicalists, they hold that, while the physical truths necessitate the phenomenal truths, the phenomenal truths cannot be a priori deduced from complete knowledge of the physical truths.
    - (In Chalmers' terminology: they recognize an *epistemic* gap but not an *ontological* gap between the physical and the phenomenal.)

A posteriori physicalism

This means:

- A posteriori physicalists agree with Jackson that Mary gains *new factual knowledge* of what it's like to see red when she leaves her black-and-white prison.
- A posteriori physicalists agree with Chalmers that zombies are *genuinely conceivable*.
- A posteriori physicalists agree with Kripke that there is *a (genuine) appearance of contingency* to the physical-phenomenal connection.

Question: How, then, do a posteriori physicalists maintain physicalism while conceding so much to anti-physicalists?

Answer: They apply what has come to be known as the *phenomenal concepts strategy*.

The phenomenal concept strategy

Let's take a "concept" to be a mental representation of a property. So understood, a concept is a symbol we deploy in thought ('Mentalese') and with which we think.

"Phenomenal concepts" are the concepts we deploy when we think of our phenomenally conscious states in the distinctively first-personal, "from the inside" way.

We also have other (non-first-personal, "from the outside") ways of thinking of phenomenally conscious states.

- Example of a phenomenal concept: [had while eyeing my clicker] "What it's like to have *this* experience will make a perfect example for today's PHIL451 discussion!"
- Example of a non-phenomenal concept: "What's bothering Steve right now must be awfully unpleasant." [A thought about Steve's pain.]

The phenomenal concept strategy

- According to physicalists pursuing the phenomenal concept strategy, it is the distinctiveness of phenomenal concepts that underlie the puzzling epistemic features of phenomenal consciousness (e.g., the false appearance of contingency).

The phenomenal concept strategy

"The task of the physicalist is to explain (1)–(8) [the features of phenomenal consciousness that make it seem so intractable for physicalism] in a manner compatible with physicalism. It is important to emphasize that this doesn't mean that the physicalist will have to give a perspicuous physical explanation of qualia; that is, close the explanatory gap. In my view once we understand what the explanatory gap consists in we will see that it cannot be closed. However, a satisfactory physicalist account should explain *this*, the fact that there is an unbridgeable explanatory gap, and show that all the other puzzling features of consciousness are, far from posing a problem for the physicalist view, features the physicalist will *expect* consciousness to have. Most theorists have attempted to explain (1)–(8) in terms of the nature of consciousness itself or to *explain away* these features. It is not surprising that neither physicalist nor dualist accounts of consciousness have been very successful at explaining these features since features (1)–(7) are entirely *epistemic* features. So it seems reasonable to suppose that the key to their understanding will correspondingly lie in understanding the conceptual apparatus we use to think about them." (Balog, p. 20)

The phenomenal concept strategy

Philosophers have proposed to understand phenomenal concepts in various different ways.

- Loar proposes that phenomenal concepts are direct recognitional concepts.
- Balog proposes that phenomenal concepts are quotational in being partly constituted by the very experience they refer to.

Loar: Directness and rigid designators

Direct: Phenomenal concepts rigidly designate their referents (namely, phenomenally conscious states) and therefore pick out those states directly and not "by way of contingent modes of presentation."

- Ordinary example of direct reference via rigid designation: "Justin Trudeau." This expression does not pick JT out as the possessor of any property only contingently instantiated by JT. It refers to him directly.

- Ordinary example of indirect reference via non-rigid designation: "The current Prime Minister of Canada". This expression picks out its referent (JT) "by way of a contingent mode of presentation." JT is *contingently* the current Prime Minister of Canada, and the description picks him out as the unique bearer of that property.

Loar: Recognitional concepts

Recognitional: Phenomenal concepts are a kind of *recognitional* concept – i.e., a concept that one possesses partly in virtue of being able to recognize (via experience) particular instances as being of the same kind. These concepts are also called are "type-demonstratives" because they have the form: "x is one of that kind."

An important feature of recognitional concepts (that will carry a lot of explanatory weight in Loar's final account):

- "[The] recognitional abilities [in which recognitional concepts are grounded] depend on no consciously accessible analysis into component features; they can be irreducibly gestalt."

Upshot: If you have a recognitional concept of a certain kind of cactus, then you can recognize new instances as "one of that kind" without being able in any way to recover or to analyze the features you are identifying in making the recognition.

(Classic example of this: the chicken sexer who masterfully sorts chickens by sex but cannot explicitly tell you *how* they do it.)

Loar: Phenomenal concepts as direct recognitional concepts

If phenomenal concepts are direct recognitional concepts, then what you are doing when you think of one of your phenomenally conscious states in the distinctively first-person ('from the inside') way is this: you are deploying a concept that refers to the state *directly* (not by way of a contingent mode of presentation) and which consists partly in your ability *to recognize* – introspectively – instances of the state (without, however, being able to articulate or analyze the features you are identifying in making those recognitions).

Loar: Phenomenal concepts as direct recognitional concepts

How this claim about phenomenal concepts helps uphold a posteriori physicalism:

(1) As a reductive physicalist, Loar holds that the identity statement "pain = CFF" is true. (We could illustrate his view as applied to a weaker claim on which pain is not identical to CFF, but it's simpler if we stick with property identities.)

(2) In virtue of his claim that phenomenal concepts are direct recognitional concepts, Loar holds that the phenomenal concept "pain" is a rigid designator: it refers to CFF/pain directly, not by way of any contingent mode of presentation.

Why this is a big deal…

(1) If phenomenal concepts are direct recognitional concepts, then there are no a priori inferential links between phenomenal concepts and theoretical concepts. Though the latter are direct (or so Loar happens to think), they are not recognitional. This means that the phenomenal concept "pain" and the theoretical concept "CFF" are, as Loar puts it, "conceptually independent."

Why this is a big deal…

(2) This matters because, given the conceptual independence of phenomenal and theoretical concepts, someone could have complete knowledge of the physical facts under theoretical concepts and yet not be able to a priori deduce the phenomenal facts under phenomenal concepts – even if, as per (1), the phenomenal *just is* physical. Hence, a posteriori physicalism.

Why this is a big deal…

But there's more! This setup gives Loar an account of why, even though phenomenal properties are identical with physical properties, they don't *seem* identical with physical properties.

(Consider the 'yellowishness' of your experience of a banana. It strikes you as a simple qualitative yellowish wash, utterly lacking in "grain." If yellowishness really is one and the same property as the fantastically complex property of, e.g., V4 activation of such-and-such type, then none of that complexity is apparent.)

The reason is that phenomenal concepts, on Loar's view, are irreducibly gestalt recognitional concepts. Your phenomenal concepts do not allow you to recover and analyze out any of the complexity that they refer to.

Why this is a big deal…

… And yet more! Though Loar holds that phenomenal concepts do not pick out their referents by way of contingent modes of presentation, he nevertheless suggests (interestingly) that they refer via modes of presentation.

Specifically, he proposes that the phenomenal properties our phenomenal concepts refer to serve, when those concepts pick them out, as their own modes of presentation. Thus, your phenomenal concept "yellowishness" refers to yellowishness in such a way that yellowishness is its own mode of presentation. It is as if an instance of yellowishness – a physical state of your brain if Loar is right – actually enters into the very concept "yellowishness" that you use to think thoughts about your experience of the banana.

- Note: if you find this proposal hard to pin down, that may be because it is … (more on this later)

Why this is a big deal…

This matters because Loar thinks this is why we have the intuition that phenomenal knowledge is somehow "substantive" and "revelatory" of the very essence of the phenomenal: it's because every time we think using a phenomenal concept, a phenomenally conscious state – in all of its glorious qualitative awesomeness – is (or seems to be?) *right there* in our very thought.

How all this applies to anti-physicalist arguments

On the Knowledge Argument: Since the typical way of acquiring phenomenal concepts is via experience, Mary lacks the appropriate phenomenal concepts before her release. When she is released, she gains "new knowledge" (under a new phenomenal concept) of a physical fact she already had "old knowledge" of (under a physical concept).

As it is sometimes put, she knows an old fact in a new way (under a new mode of presentation).

How all this applies to anti-physicalist arguments

On the Conceivability Argument: Since phenomenal and theoretical concepts are conceptually independent, it is easy to conceive using only theoretical concepts of the physical and functional features of a scenario, a zombie scenario, that is strictly speaking impossible.

How all this applies to anti-physicalist arguments

On the Explanatory Gap: Here Loar says something especially interesting. If by "physically explain the phenomenal" one means simply "tell a coherent story according to which the phenomenal is physical," one can do that via a posteriori physicalism. But if by "physically explain the phenomenal" one means "provide an explanation of the phenomenal in physical terms that completely removes any lingering feeling that the phenomenal is something over and above the physical," one can't do it, Loar says. But he thinks that his phenomenal concepts strategy explains why we cannot achieve such a mystery-eliminating explanation.

- See Loar's remarks in the section 8 paragraph beginning "[t]he problem of the explanatory gap stems then from an illusion."

Balog's refinements

As Balog sees things, a satisfying form of physicalism must accommodate the following desiderata.

(1) Only subjects who have undergone or are currently undergoing the relevant phenomenal states can token the corresponding phenomenal concepts. (cf. Jackson's knowledge argument)

(2) Asymmetric epistemology. We are directly aware of our own conscious states in ways no one else can be.

(3) Transparency: when one turns one's attention to one's own conscious perceptual experience, one can become aware of the features of the objects perceived.

(4) Infallibility/incorrigibility: we seem to be infallible about certain judgments involving certain phenomenal concepts – e.g., my judging 'phenomenal red is occurring right now'.

(5) Zombies are conceivable.

(6) There is an explanatory gap.

(7) Acquaintance: we know our conscious states not by inference but by immediate acquaintance, which gives us direct, unmediated, substantial insight into their nature.

(8) There is something it is like to have conscious states.

Balog's refinement

- Like Loar, Balog's strategy for accommodating these epistemic features is to adopt the phenomenal concept strategy. However, she argues for a *slightly* different implementation of that strategy to the one that Loar seems to recommend.

Balog's critique of Loar

Balog finds an apparent tension in Loar's proposal (see pp. 24-25).

- On the one hand, Loar stresses the directness of phenomenal concepts and goes so far as to suggest that phenomenal properties somehow serve as their own mode of presentation when we form phenomenal judgments about them.
- On the other hand, Loar describes phenomenal concepts as "tracking" their referents (i.e., phenomenal properties), suggesting that are phenomenal properties and phenomenal concepts are completely distinct states and at most causally related.

Balog thinks this is an unstable combination of views but that the solution is clear: reject the second point (which has implausible consequences) and endorse the first. But then the question becomes how to make good on (i.e., flesh out) the first point?

Balog's refinement

- On Balog's proposal, the key to satisfying the above desiderata is to regard phenomenal concepts as "direct" in a very specific (and especially intimate) way. In particular, she writes:
- "Direct phenomenal concepts pick out their referent in virtue of their being *partly constituted by* a token of their reference. In this they are unique among concepts. On this account, there is an intimate relation between a phenomenal concept and its referent; more intimate than any causal or tracking relation. It is also a way of cashing out the idea that the experience serves as its own mode of presentation. The experience, so to speak, presents itself." (Balog, p. 26).
- She argues that we can unpack this partial constitution requirement via the notion of (mental) quotation.

Broader considerations about modal epistemology

Recall the second premise of the Zombie argument:

- (C) If P is conceivable, then P is metaphysically possible.

A priori physicalists tend either to accept C or, at the very least, to insist that the best way to respond to the conceivability argument is to insist that zombie scenarios aren't conceivable. A posteriori physicalists, by contrast, grant that zombie scenarios are conceivable but insist that they aren't metaphysically possible. Thus, a posteriori physicalists reject C.

Question: are there independent grounds for resolving this question in favour of a posteriori physicalism?

Broader considerations about modal epistemology

Objection 1: C fails to respect facts about what happens when there are no a priori inferential links between distinct concepts (due to Christopher Hill and Brian McLaughlin).

Broader considerations about modal epistemology (non-examinable)

The idea: Whenever there are no a priori inferential links between two concepts CON1 and CON2, we can deploy the concepts to conceive of situations in which there are things falling under CON1 but not CON2 (or vice versa). (Concepts not a priori connected are, on this view, like freely mix-and-matchable bits of "psychological type.") This is what explains the fact that we can conceive of impossible situations in which, say, there is water but not H2O: WATER and H2O can be psychologically mixed-and-matched. But the concept of PAIN and the concept of CFF are such that there are no a priori inferential links between them. Thus, pain without C-fiber firing (or vice versa) is coherently conceivable even if not possible.

Broader considerations about modal epistemology (non-examinable)

- A worry about this objection (due to Steve Yablo): this objections entails that there should be more illusions of possibility than there are. Example: there are no a priori inferential links between the concepts H2O and PAIN. Thus, the objection predicts that it should be coherently conceivable that your glass of H2O could've been in pain. But that isn't conceivable!
- • Upshot: The Hill and McLaughlin objection is perhaps on to something but it makes conceivability too easy.

Broader considerations about modal epistemology (non-examinable)

Objection 2: C generates cases that conflict with necessary truths (due to Stephen Yablo).

- The idea: Consider Goldbach's Conjecture, the unproved arithmetical claim that every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two primes. We don't know whether Goldbach's Conjecture is true—no one has proved it. Arguably, this entails that we can conceive of it being either true or false, i.e., coming out either way. But if so, C can't be right. Why not? Because Goldbach's Conjecture is a mathematical proposition, so it is either necessarily true or necessarily false.

Broader considerations about modal epistemology (non-examinable)

A worry about this objection: Is it true that we can conceive of Goldbach's Conjecture coming out either way? What would conceiving of these things be? (Careful! Reading a headline about a proof, or disproof, or hearing something from a mathematician isn't obviously relevant.)

Broader considerations about modal epistemology (non-examinable)

Question: what if we reject C? Do we have to give up on all of those areas of philosophy—and science!—that seemed to rest on it?

- Examples: personal identity (body switching and duplication scenarios), theory of knowledge (Gettier cases), free will (arguments against compatibilist theories), philosophy of mind (perfect actor counterexamples to logical behaviourism), moral philosophy (arguments against utilitarianism), and so on. Basically all "but there could be a case in which…"-type moves.

Perhaps not. Perhaps what we're doing when we think we're using C is really just bringing to bear broad theoretical considerations on our judgments together with empirical data so as to arrive at an overall view of things that is as plausible, all things considered, as possible. This sort of method is defeasible but also perhaps highly reliable.