

Subjective Character and Reflexive Content

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I. Zombies and the Knowledge Argument

John Perry's splendid book, *Knowledge, Possibility, and Consciousness*, sets out to dispel the three main objections currently lodged against mind-body materialism. These are the objection from the alleged possibility of zombies, the knowledge argument made famous by Frank Jackson, and the modal objections due principally to Saul A. Kripke and David Chalmers.¹ The discussion is penetrating throughout, and it develops many points in illuminating detail.

Perry argues that the knowledge and modal arguments both rest on a failure to distinguish two kinds of content, which he calls subject-matter content and reflexive content. The subject-matter content of a thought consists in the truth conditions that must be satisfied by the objects and properties the thought is about. As Perry notes, discussions of content typically assume without comment that this is all there is to content.

But this, Perry argues, is a mistake. The thought that I am now writing about Perry has the same subject-matter content as the thought that DR is now writing about Perry; the two thoughts impose exactly the same truth conditions on the objects and properties those thoughts are about. Still, the two thoughts differ in respect of content. To capture that difference we must invoke a distinct kind of content.

Perry's notion of reflexive content is designed for just that purpose. Reflexive content places conditions not just on the objects and properties a

¹ Frank Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," *Philosophical Quarterly* XXXII, 127 (April 1982): 127-136, and "What Mary Didn't Know," *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXXIII, 5 (May 1986): 291-295; Saul A. Kripke, "Identity and Necessity," in *Identity and Individuation*, ed. Milton K. Munitz, New York: NYU Press, 1971, pp. 161-164, and *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980, pp. 144-164; and David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

thought or utterance is about, but also “on the utterances or thoughts *themselves*” (21).² Not taking reflexive content into account, Perry urges, leads to a “distorted view of knowledge,” and results in our being “at a loss to understand a number of important phenomena, such as recognizing and identifying things” (69).

This distinction between subject-matter and reflexive content is fundamental to Perry’s discussion of the knowledge and modal arguments. His discussion of the zombie argument does not rely on that distinction, but Perry sees his diagnosis of that argument as paving the way for his diagnosis of the knowledge argument.

Zombies are beings that are physically and functionally indistinguishable from us, but lack conscious qualitative states. There is nothing it’s like for them to be in any of the states they’re in. Perry argues that, if beings could function physically exactly as we do without having conscious qualitative states, then conscious qualitative states would play no role in causing behavior or anything else. If beings could be in states with the right causal roles but no qualitative properties, those qualitative properties can’t be doing any causal work. He concludes that, if zombies are possible, conscious qualitative states are causally inert. The possibility of zombies implies epiphenomenalism.

But that, he points out, has implications for materialism only if we assume that epiphenomenalism is incompatible with materialism. And arguably it isn’t. A materialist epiphenomenalism allows that neural states implement the functional roles we associate with qualitative states and have qualitative mental properties, but insists that those qualitative properties are causally inert.³ The possibility of zombies, Perry concludes, provides “a test for dividing epiphenomenalists from nonepiphenomenalists, not an argument for defending dualism against physicalism” (79).

Perry sees the knowledge argument as facing a structurally similar difficulty. The possibility of zombies is relevant not to materialism but to epiphenomenalism. Similarly, he argues, the knowledge argument undermines not materialism, but only the independent, and unfounded, assumption that subject-matter content is all there is to content.

On the knowledge argument, neuroscientist Mary learns everything physical there is to know about color vision without ever experiencing red. Still, when she does first consciously experience red, she learns something new, namely, what it’s like to experience red. Since Mary already knew everything

² Parenthesized references are all to John Perry, *Knowledge, Possibility, and Consciousness*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001. Emphasis is always in the original.

³ Construing epiphenomenalism as the causal inertness of mental properties, and not the states that have those properties. For an opposing view, see Donald Davidson, “Thinking Causes,” in *Mental Causation*, ed. John Heil and Alfred Mele, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, 3-17.

physical about experiencing red and now gets new knowledge, that new knowledge must be about something nonphysical.

Mary's new knowledge is usually described by way of a 'wh' clause: She learns *what* it's like consciously to experience red. But knowing 'wh' abstracts from the full content of one's knowledge; one knows *what* something is only if one knows *that* it's an *F*. What is the full content of Mary's new knowledge, specified with a 'that' clause?

According to Perry, what Mary comes to know is that *this* is what it's like to experience red, where 'this' refers to a particular experience. She comes to know that the subjective character of this very experience is that of consciously experiencing red. So Mary's new knowledge differs from her prior knowledge in its reflexive knowledge. Her knowledge that *this* is what it's like to experience red is new not because it's about something nonphysical, but because it has different reflexive content.

This explanation of what's new about Mary's knowledge would be unavailable if we thought that all content is subject-matter content. So, on this account, the knowledge argument shows not that conscious experiences have some nonphysical aspect, but only that subject-matter content can't do justice to some of the knowledge we can have of conscious experiences. This is to be expected. Mary's new knowledge is a matter of her recognizing and identifying her experiences of red, and Perry argues independently that we need reflexive content to account for the recognizing and identifying of things. We needn't see Mary's new knowledge as nonphysical any more than we must with my knowledge that I am now writing about Perry, relative to my knowledge that DR is.⁴

As suggestive and inviting as Perry's account is, I do not find it completely convincing. In section II, I indicate my concerns, and in section III I very briefly sketch how those concerns might be met. I won't here address the independent issues raised by Perry's impressive discussion of the modal argument.

II. What Mary Learns

Perry likens the knowledge argument to a well-known antimaterialist objection considered by J. J. C. Smart, which Smart says may first have been put to him by Max Black.⁵ Even if qualitative mental states are identical with brain states, there must be independent properties in respect of which we iden-

⁴ This account of the apparent antimaterialist force of the knowledge argument is reminiscent of Thomas Nagel's explanation in "Physicalism" of why, despite recognizing its truth, we're so tempted to reject physicalism (*The Philosophical Review* LXXIV, 3 [July 1965]: 339-356, sec. v, pp. 353-356).

⁵ J. J. C. Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes," in V. C. Chappell, ed., *The Philosophy of Mind* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 166, n. 13 (slightly revised from an earlier version in *The Philosophical Review*, LXVIII, 2 [April 1959]: 141-156).

tify those states both as mental states and as brain states. The properties in respect of which we pick the states out as mental would be distinctively mental properties. But the existence of distinctively mental properties, on this objection, would defeat materialism.

This objection has elicited extensive discussion. But it relies on a question-begging way of setting things up. Doubtless the properties in respect of which we pick some states out as qualitative are distinctively mental properties. But that by itself causes no difficulty for materialism. Only if distinctively mental properties were also nonphysical would materialism be in trouble. And, since materialism holds that mental properties are just a special range of physical properties, it's plainly question begging simply to assume that mental properties are nonphysical. If the knowledge argument is at bottom the objection Smart originally considered, we don't need reflexive content to answer it.⁶

Reflexive content seems to figure in meeting the knowledge argument because what Mary learns is what it's like for her to see red—that is, that it's like *this* for her to see red. But it's not clear that the recognitional aspect of Mary's new knowledge, which perhaps we can capture only by appeal to reflexive content, is what drives the antimaterialist. Rather, the antimaterialist maintains that the properties in virtue of which Mary comes to recognize what it's like for her to see red are nonphysical properties.

On the objection Smart considered, the very existence of mental properties automatically undermines materialism. That's question begging, since the materialist holds that mental properties are just a special case of physical properties. The knowledge argument is a step forward. It avoids simply begging that question, since it gives us an independent reason to think that the distinctively mental properties in respect of which we pick out qualitative states as such are nonphysical properties. They are nonphysical, on that argument, because Mary learned everything physical one could know about consciously seeing red, but still learned something new when she first consciously saw red.

When Mary first consciously sees red, she learns what it's like for her to see red. She could express what she learns by saying that *this* is what it's like to see red, where 'this' refers to a particular subjective character, that which normally sighted people have when they consciously see red. Mary's knowledge is new, according to Perry, only because of its recognitional

⁶ Smart didn't notice the objection's question-begging character, and sought to answer it by construing mental descriptions as "topic-neutral." But Smart's "topic-neutral translations" were unconvincing, since they construed ostensibly mental descriptions as involving nothing distinctively mental, presumably because he accepted that mental properties are automatically nonphysical. On these matters, see David M. Rosenthal, "Mentality and Neutrality," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXIII, 13 (July 15, 1976): 386-415, sec. 1.

aspect, not its subject matter. It's about something physical, but accessed recognitionally, not by way of textbooks.

But what Mary's learns might be new not only in respect of its recognitional aspect, but also because the qualitative properties she comes to be able to recognize are nonphysical. Just as we cannot simply assume that these properties are nonphysical, so we also cannot assume without argument that they're physical. Unless we can show that subjective character is physical, the materialist faces a problem that's independent of the recognitional aspect of Mary's new knowledge.

Perry works from an assumption he calls antecedent physicalism, on which one "sees compelling reasons for [physicalism] and will not give it up without seeing some clear reason to do so" (27). So perhaps that entitles us to assume that subjective character is physical absent some reason to think otherwise. And the knowledge argument provides no such reason if the knowledge Mary gets on first consciously seeing red could be new solely because of its recognitional character.

But antecedent physicalism arguably results in a questionbegging formulation of the knowledge argument. On Perry's account, the textbooks Mary studies before ever seeing red teach her that there's a particular subjective character that normally sighted people have when they look at red objects; Perry calls this Q_R . By hypothesis, Mary's textbook knowledge exhausts the physical nature of seeing red. But the antimaterialist requires also that this knowledge be exclusively physical, since Mary's learning about something nonphysical from her textbooks would obscure any new nonphysical knowledge she might get on first consciously seeing red. To ensure that her textbook knowledge is wholly physical, Perry stipulates that Mary's textbooks take no "position on whether Q_R is a physical aspect of the brain or some other kind of property" (99).

But that's not enough. If Q_R is nonphysical, Mary's textbooks teach her about something nonphysical whether or not they describe it that way. Perry stipulates that Mary's textbooks teach her only about the incontrovertibly physical features of Q_R , such as its causal interactions with physical stimuli and behavioral responses. But even that isn't enough; unless we've established independently that Q_R itself is physical, Mary's learning about it may well be learning about something nonphysical.

Arguably this is Jackson's conception of the knowledge argument. As Jackson describes things, before consciously seeing red Mary not only lacks knowledge of what it's like *for her* to see red; she doesn't even know that there's some subjective character *others* have that's special to consciously seeing red.⁷ She knows only how the relevant neural states causally interact with behavior and stimuli.

⁷ "What Mary Didn't Know," 292.

Perry registers puzzlement about this, since on his view the knowledge Mary gets on first experiencing red is new only in being recognitional, that is, only in respect of its reflexive content. But Jackson's formulation is just what we'd expect if it's an open question as to whether Q_R is physical. Mary wouldn't then know from her textbooks about Q_R ; so she wouldn't know even that others have it. Only when she herself experiences Q_R will she be in a position to surmise that others have it as well. Only if we've shown that Q_R is physical can Mary's textbooks teach her about it. It's question begging to build that assumption into our formulation of the knowledge argument.

According to Perry, Mary's new knowledge is knowledge of an identity. She comes to know that *this*, referring to the subjective character she's having, is identical with the subjective character of seeing red. Both sides of the identity refer to the same property, namely, the subjective character of seeing red. The two sides differ in content only because the left-hand side, 'this', has reflexive content that the right-hand side doesn't have.

But Jackson's formulation of the knowledge argument precludes our understanding Mary's new knowledge this way. Mary's textbooks don't teach her about Q_R , the subjective character of seeing red. So what she comes to know on consciously seeing red is at best only that *this* subjective character is what she, and presumably other normally sighted people, experience when visually presented with red stimuli. Mary doesn't simply gain new recognitional knowledge; she actually learns about a new property, the subjective character of seeing red. And we cannot sustain materialism without showing that this subjective character, which Mary comes to recognize, is physical.

III. Conscious Qualitative Properties

Antimaterialism seems tempting not because antimaterialists have the better account of what conscious qualitative properties are, but because nobody's account is all that widely accepted. And some think that we can best explain the lack of a generally accepted account by supposing that the properties in question are nonphysical. Materialist arguments, by themselves, can't undermine that temptation; what's needed, in addition, is an informative account of the nature of conscious qualitative properties which squares with physicalism. I conclude with a brief sketch of one such account.

Qualitative states sometimes occur without being conscious, as Perry notes (49). Moreover, we can give an informative account of qualitative properties that's altogether independent of whether the states with those properties are conscious. For example, the mental qualities that characterize visual sensations of color are properties that resemble and differ from one another in ways that parallel the similarities and differences among the commonsense, perceptible color properties of physical objects. Thus the mental quality of red resembles and differs from every other mental color quality in just the

ways that the commonsense red of physical objects resembles and differs from other physical color properties. Since perception can occur nonconsciously, this account is independent of consciousness. Nothing in this account, moreover, at all resists physicalism.⁸

If one is in no way conscious of being in a state, that state is not, intuitively, a conscious state, and there is then nothing it's like for one to be in that state. So conscious qualitative states are states that we are in some suitable way conscious of being in; for one thing, we're presumably conscious of it in a way that seems unmediated. I've argued elsewhere that we're aware of our conscious states by having occurrent thoughts that we are in those states, thoughts that rely on no conscious inference. And we can safely follow Perry (13) in assuming that nothing about the having of thoughts resists physicalism.

It doesn't usually seem, when one has a conscious sensation, that one has a thought about that sensation. But no thought is itself conscious unless accompanied in turn by another thought about it, and presumably this rarely happens. And subjectively it doesn't seem that thoughts that aren't conscious are there at all.

It's arguable that these higher-order thoughts (*HOTs*) are actually responsible for there being something it's like for one to be in conscious qualitative states. When we learn more refined concepts for the qualitative differences among our qualitative properties, we typically come to be conscious of our qualitative states in exactly those fine-grained respects. But concepts figure in our mental lives only by occurring in thoughts, in this case *HOTs* about target qualitative properties. Since *HOTs* evidently affect which qualitative properties we're conscious of, it's reasonable to hold that they also make the difference between qualitative properties' occurring consciously and not.⁹ Again, everything in this account of conscious qualitative states fits comfortably with physicalism.

Perry urges that "merely being in a state that has a subjective character" enables one, by itself, to be aware of that subjective character and to know about it (48). But he maintains that this is not because the sensation causes that awareness, since we aren't aware of sensations by sensing them. But this overlooks the possibility that we are aware of our conscious sensations by having thoughts about them.

⁸ See David M. Rosenthal, "The Independence of Consciousness and Sensory Quality," in *Consciousness: Philosophical Issues, 1, 1991*, ed. Enrique Villanueva, Atascadero, California: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991, pp. 15-36, and "The Colors and Shapes of Visual Experiences," in *Consciousness and Intentionality: Models and Modalities of Attribution*, ed. Denis Fisette, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999, pp. 95-118.

⁹ See David M. Rosenthal, "Sensory Quality and the Relocation Story," *Philosophical Topics*, 26, 1 and 2 (Spring and Fall 1999): 321-350, and "Explaining Consciousness," in *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. David J. Chalmers, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 406-421.

According to Perry, our thinking about qualitative states involves what he calls “Humean ideas,” which are the “phenomenological part of the concept[s] of” such states (32). It’s unclear how to understand these Humean ideas. Perry concedes discomfort in thinking that Humean ideas literally resemble qualitative states (31), though he also says, perhaps metaphorically, that the Humean idea of pain “cannot resemble any sensations but pain sensations” (181).

Resemblance aside, Perry insists that there’s a close tie between a Humean idea and the quality it refers to. This, he suggests, is because it’s difficult to imagine “thoughts that involve the [Humean] idea of pain being just as they are, but being about” a different quality (32). By contrast, he notes, it’s easy to imagine a word that refers to a quality being just as it is but referring to a different quality. But that difference has nothing to do with Humean ideas. It’s because, even if thoughts have some physical nature, we don’t now know enough to describe thoughts in such terms. So we identify them only by way of their intentional properties, whereas we identify words both semantically and also in terms of their nonsemantic, physical features.

In any case, the foregoing account of conscious qualities explains the close fit Humean ideas intuitively have with their targets. The mental quality of red is that property which resembles and differs from other mental colors in ways that parallel the similarities and differences physical red has to other commonsense physical colors. So the concept of a red sensation is the concept of a state that exhibits those very similarities and differences, in terms of which we specify the mental quality. This results in our strong impression that that concept couldn’t be about any other quality. That impression looks mysterious only on the unfounded traditional view that qualitative properties aren’t susceptible to informative description.

No brief discussion can do justice to the richness of Perry’s treatment of these topics. There is much to be learned not only from his probing challenges to antimaterialist arguments, but also from his many penetrating discussions of related issues, such as the complex and delicate connections between perceiving and action, to take but one example. This is in every way a highly rewarding book.