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## Perry, KNOWLEDGE, POSSIBILITY, AND CONSCIOUSNESS

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*Knowledge, Possibility, and Consciousness*, by John Perry. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001. Pp. xvi + 212. \$29.95 (hardback), \$15.00 (paper).

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Physicalism is the view that actuality is exhausted by physical reality. It's the reigning orthodoxy in contemporary philosophy of mind. But it faces a formidable problem: the problem of the experience gap. We all undergo various phenomenal experiences—those experiences that have a *feel*, a *what-it-is-like* aspect to them. If physicalism is true, phenomenal experiences are brain states or constituted by brain states. That strikes many as false. The reason, says John Perry: "the gap between what it is like and what brain states are like is simply too large" (14).

There have been three prominent developments and variations on the experience gap argument: the zombie argument, the knowledge argument, and the modal argument. Call the position that these three arguments advance *neo-dualism*. In *Knowledge, Possibility, and Consciousness* (based off his 1999 Jean Nicod lectures), John Perry attempts to defend his version of physicalism from these three neo-dualist arguments.

Before addressing these arguments individually, Perry devotes chapters two and three to spelling out and clarifying his version of physicalism, which he calls "antecedent physicalism." Antecedent physicalism is the by-product of a two-step process. The first step is the *common sense* step. In this step—and assuming a physicalist metaphysic—"one lists the salient facts about mental states, both psychological and phenomenal, that seem to be the basis for the way we experience these states, recognize them in others, and use them to organize a large part of our lives" (28). The following are some of the common sense theses of antecedent physicalism. Mental states cause various physical events. Experiences often have a subjective character (*it is like something* to be in them), which are inner states of persons, knowable from the first-person perspective. Subjective experiences are not analyzable in causal terms. And so forth.

Perry also stresses that antecedent physicalism is not committed to epiphenomenalism, functionalism, or any sort of supervenience thesis. By the end of chapter three, Perry's physicalism amounts to a type-identity theory of mind: "subjective characters of our experiences are physical states of the brain. This is a supposition of an identity between types or kinds of events" (64).

The second step is the *coherence* step. In this step, one asks: "Is there any reason I should give up this combination of common sense and physicalism? Is there any contradiction or incoherence in my view?" (29) To complete this step, Perry turns to the three neo-dualist arguments.

Chapter four addresses David Chalmers' zombie argument. Zombies are creatures that lack consciousness but are physically and functionally indistinguishable from conscious beings. Chalmers argues that since these creatures are conceivable, they are metaphysically possible. Since they are metaphysically possible, physicalism is false.

Perry's response to this argument is as follows. The zombie argument has "virtually nothing at all to do with the issue of physicalism versus

dualism"; rather it's "a test for epiphenomenalism" (77). But zombies are only possible if epiphenomenalism is true. So they are only possible "unless we are *already* committed to epiphenomenalism" (80; italics in original). That's question begging. So the zombie argument fails.

Perry is advancing two claims here. Both are problematic. Start with the first claim that the zombie argument has nothing to do with the issue of physicalism versus dualism. Why does he think that? Because accepting the possibility of zombies is as "acceptable to the physicalist epiphenomenalist as to the dualist epiphenomenalist" (79). That's only right if physicalist epiphenomenalism is a coherent position. But it seems false *by definition*. Worse, Perry never tells us what physicalist epiphenomenalism is. So he's not entitled to claim the zombie argument has nothing to do with physicalism versus dualism until he fills in the necessary details.

Now take Perry's second claim that zombies are possible only if epiphenomenalism is being assumed. That claim is false. There is no reason why the interactionist dualist, for instance, could not accept the possibility of zombies. As Chalmers points out, the interactionist dualist could accept the "possibility of zombies, by accepting the possibility of physically identical worlds in which physical causal gaps (those filled in the actual world by mental processes) go unfilled, or are filled by something other than mental processes."<sup>1</sup> So the zombie argument is not question begging. Perry's rebuttal fails.

Chapters five through seven address Frank Jackson's knowledge argument. The basic idea of knowledge argument can be put as follows: one might know all the objective, physical facts about human consciousness, but fail to know the subjective, phenomenal facts of human consciousness. So there are facts that are left out in the physicalist's story. Consider Mary. Mary, locked in a black and white room, learns all the physical facts about human color vision. One day she is released from this room. She sees a red rose. Jackson argues that Mary learns something new in this experience: she learns what it is like to see a color. Knowing all the physical facts of color vision leaves certain facts out. So physicalism is false.

Perry's diagnosis of this argument falls in the "two ways" or old fact/new guise analysis of the knowledge argument. For Perry, the qualia that accompany seeing red, Qr, just are neurological properties. So pre-release Mary knows:

- (1) Qr is what it's like to see red.

But when Mary is released and sees a color for the first time, she is able to form two new beliefs:

- (2) This<sub>i</sub> is what it is like to see red (where this<sub>i</sub> stands for an inner demonstrative).
- (3) Qr is this<sub>i</sub>; subjective character.

According to Perry, all the following are true:

- Qr is a physical state.

- (1), (2), and (3) are all true.

When Mary leaves her room, she forms two new beliefs, expressed in (2) and (3). (146-147)

How does Perry argue for this? (1) is a “detached” belief, formed through the reading of books. (2) is “attached” to an act of attention, which has a certain subjective character. (3) has the same subject matter content as (1) and (2). But the “reflexive content” of (3) differs. Reflexive content concerns the origins of concepts and whether or not the beliefs employing various concepts are true or not. So (3) is true if “the act of inner attention to which it is attached is of the origin of Mary’s Qr concept” (148).

So the change in Mary’s post-release beliefs does not result in any new conditions on the truth of her beliefs, given that (1), (2), and (3) have the same *subject matter* content (Qr = neurological properties). “But it does impose new conditions on the truth of her beliefs *abstracting* from what they refer to: the condition that the subjective character that is the origin of her concept is the very one to which she is attending” (p. 148; italics in original). In a nutshell: out of her room, Mary knows an “old fact in a new way” and also acquires “a new bit of knowledge and a new fact at the level of reflexive content” (159). None of this threatens antecedent physicalism, argues Perry.

Perry continues his case against the knowledge argument. The knowledge argument rests on the “subject matter assumption,” the “view that there is some kind of knowledge that involves grasping a fact not from any point of view—a view from nowhere” (166). That assumption is false, says Perry. “A system of objective representation is a system for completing knowledge and does not constitute the whole of knowledge” (167).

These three chapters comprise the bulk of the book. The level of argument is generally high and a good deal of light is shed on many topics. It is impossible to evaluate all of Perry’s arguments here. So I’ll confine myself to the following three concerns.

First, Perry’s discussion of phenomenal concepts and inner demonstratives was a bit incomplete. Some philosophers have forcefully argued that phenomenal concepts are not, *pace* Perry, demonstrative concepts. Perry doesn’t adequately address these arguments, making his argument less dialectically effective than it otherwise could have been.

Second, the antiphysicalist might wonder how it is possible for phenomenal concepts to originate without any corresponding qualitative states. Perry will undoubtedly say that he doesn’t need to answer this question because he’s assuming physicalism and then trying to rebut arguments that threaten it. That response is fine as it goes. But it will certainly leave the antiphysicalist unconvinced.

Third, in rejecting the subject matter assumption of the knowledge argument, Perry writes: “There is a way of knowing what an experience is like that is available to a person who is having the experience that is not available to others” (166). So he seems to be rejecting the following:

- (\*) Experiences are objective: no subjective view point is needed to understand their true nature.

But it’s not clear that Perry himself is justified in rejecting (\*). The reason is

simple. Perry explicitly endorses a type-identity theory of mind. Brain processes are completely objective processes. That makes it hard to see how Perry is entitled to reject (\*). At the very least, more details are needed—far more than we are given.

Chapter eight takes up the third neo-dualistic argument, the modal argument. The chapter is divided into a discussion of “Kripke’s argument” and “Chalmers’ argument.” The basic idea of the modal argument is straightforward. Antecedent physicalism says conscious states are identical to physical states. Identities are necessary. But these identities don’t seem necessary. The possibility that pain  $\neq$  stimulated C-fibers seems quite intelligible.

In response, Perry agrees that the possibility of pain  $\neq$  stimulated C-fibers seems quite intelligible—but that possibility, he argues, is only at the level of reflexive content. He writes:

We cannot find a real possibility for the thought that pain is not stimulated C-fibers at the subject matter level...But we can find real possibilities at the reflexive levels of content that give us a grip on how the mind and the world it represents might fit together in a way that makes the thought true and explain the sort of internal coherence it has, even in the face of its necessarily falsity (187-188).

Perry also argues that the modal argument, along with the knowledge argument and the zombie argument, rests on an overly restricted conception of content: namely, the subject matter of a belief can yield an exhaustive account of the belief’s content. Without this assumption, he says, these arguments fail.

Perry’s appeal to reflexive content and our conceptual failure to link phenomenal concepts with our stimulated C-fiber concepts to rebut the modal argument is inadequate. To see why, consider S. S has linked perfectly her phenomenal concepts of pain to her C-fiber concepts. There is no conceptual failure on S’s part. It seems entirely possible that S could still continue to believe that the necessary truth of pain = stimulated C-fibers appears contingent. So Perry’s response to the modal argument only offers an explanation of why certain necessary truths are not obvious to us. But it fails to explain the apparent contingency of pain and brain states. And *that* is what the physicalist needs to explain.

Despite my critical remarks, Perry pursues these three antiphysicalist arguments with considerable depth. Those who prefer spit-and-polish philosophy, with precisely formulated claims and inferences, will find the argumentation somewhat loose and incomplete at times. Nonetheless, this book is honest, original, stimulating. Anyone interested in the debate over dualism and physicalism needs to read this book.<sup>2</sup>

#### NOTES

1. David Chalmers, forthcoming: “Imagination, Idexicality, and Intensions”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
2. Thanks to Neal Judisch for helpful comments.