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Knowledge by Experience. Or Why Physicalism Should not be Our Default Position in Consciousness Studies

Alfredo Tomasetta^(α)

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Abstract Current philosophical and scientific approaches to consciousness are very often characterised by a strong background presupposition: whatever the precise details of a theory of consciousness may be, a physicalist – or materialist – view of consciousness itself must be correct. I believe, however, that this conviction, pervasive though it may be, is not really justified. In particular, I think (1) that the arguments offered in favour of the materialist presupposition are weak and unconvincing, and (2) that there is a very strong *prima facie* case for rejecting physicalism regarding phenomenal consciousness. In a previous article of mine I have already discussed the first point; the present paper is devoted to elaborating the second, presenting a common-sense-based argument against physicalism.

KEYWORDS: Consciousness; Physicalism; Knowledge; Nature/Essence; Common Sense

Riassunto *Conoscere per Esperienza. O del perché il fisicalismo non dovrebbe essere la nostra posizione di default nello studio della coscienza* - Gli attuali approcci filosofici e scientifici alla coscienza sono molto spesso caratterizzati da una forte presupposizione di sfondo: qualunque siano i dettagli precisi di una teoria della coscienza, una visione fisicalista – o materialista – della coscienza stessa deve essere corretta. Credo tuttavia che questa convinzione, per quanto pervasiva, non sia davvero giustificata. In particolare penso che (1) gli argomenti offerti a favore della presupposizione materialista siano deboli e non convincenti e che (2) ci sia un argomento *prima facie* molto forte per respingere il fisicalismo circa la coscienza fenomenica. Ho già discusso il primo punto in un articolo precedente; il presente articolo è dedicato a sviluppare il secondo punto, presentando un argomento contro il fisicalismo basato sul senso comune.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Coscienza; Fisicalismo; Conoscenza; Natura/Essenza; Senso comune



Introduction

CURRENT PHILOSOPHICAL AND SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES TO consciousness are very often characterised by a strong background presupposition: whatever the precise details of a theory of consciousness may be, a physicalist

– or materialist – view of consciousness itself must be correct.¹ This materialist conviction is such a widespread – and indeed mainstream – one that the vast majority of its adherents scarcely feel the need to state it explicitly: physicalism, many believe, is just the obvious default framework in which to de-

^(α)NEtS - Center for Neurocognition, Epistemology, and Theoretical Syntax, Scuola Superiore Universitaria IUSS, Palazzo del Broletto, Piazza della Vittoria, 15 – 27100 Pavia (I)

E-mail: alfredo.tomasetta@iusspavia.it (✉)



velop theories and research concerning consciousness.

I think, however, that this conviction, pervasive though it may be, is not really justified. My opinion, in particular, is that (1) the (few) arguments offered in favour of the materialist presupposition are very weak indeed, and that (2) there is a very strong *prima facie* case for rejecting physicalism regarding phenomenal consciousness. In a previous article of mine I have discussed at length the first point;² the present paper is devoted to elaborating the second.

The strong *prima facie* case against materialism I have in mind belongs to a well-known family of arguments, namely the family of the knowledge arguments – the Mary case put forward by Jackson being just the most famous among them.³ In particular, what I am going to argue is that there is a *very common* belief concerning our knowledge of phenomenally conscious mental states (or experiences)⁴ in the light of which materialism is actually false.

My version of the knowledge argument, it seems to me, is simpler and more straightforward than others, and it focuses on what I think is the core issue in the physicalism/anti-physicalism debate concerning consciousness. And, notice, this version of the knowledge argument is not proposed as conclusively establishing the falsity of physicalism, and is far from being a compellingly demonstrative argument. My more modest point is to highlight how very strong is the *prima facie* case for non-materialism concerning phenomenal consciousness. It is in fact so strong, I submit, that we should be wary of the mainstream background presupposition in favour of materialism.

Now, briefly, the plan of the paper. As I have said, I am going to argue that there is an extremely common belief concerning our knowledge of experiences in the light of which materialism turns out to be false. So, first, in section 2, I state the common belief in question and give some examples. Then, in section 3, I show that materialism requires the nega-

tion of the common belief. Finally, in section 4, I examine the case against physicalism one can make by using the results of sections 2 and 3, and briefly draw the moral of the story.

Let us now start with the common belief I have made reference to.

■ The common belief (CB)

Many people are ready to subscribe, quite unproblematically, to the following idea: one is only able to know what an experience is – the nature or essence of an experience – if one has or has had that experience. Or, in other words: if one knows what experience E is (if one knows its nature or essence), then one has or has had E.

This idea, which so stated may seem rather abstract, is, on the contrary, an absolutely common one. Let us see.

Suppose your neighbour, lucky her, has never felt physical pain, and ask her: «Do you know what pain is?». I think it obvious that her answer would be something like: «No, of course not. There is no way to know what pain is without feeling pain; and you already knew that, as indeed everybody knows». And this common sense answer means, of course, that one is only able to know what pain is if one has had – or felt – pain.

The same goes for more specific kinds of experience – let us focus again on painful ones. Your neighbour has never had headaches. Ask her: «Do you know what headaches are?» and she will reply: «No, of course not. There is no way to know what headaches are without actually having had headaches. You already knew that, as indeed everybody knows». Again: one is only able to know what a headache is if one has had a headache.

And, of course, exactly similar cases can be multiplied as one likes, considering, to give just a few examples, the taste of pineapples, the sound of oboes, the sensation of warm water on the skin, and so on and so forth. So let me now restate the general idea behind these ordinary cases – let us call it “*the common belief*” (CB):

(CB)

One is only able to know what an experience is (its nature or essence) if one has or has had that experience.

Or, in other words:

If one knows what experience E is (its nature or essence), then one has or has had E.

Now notice that those who are inclined to accept this thesis – they are legion – are also usually inclined to say – on reflection – that CB is only a rough and ready statement of a more nuanced principle.

For example, they would usually say, on reflection, that one might be able to imagine, and know, the nature of a particular colour experience one has never had, *if one has had some similar colour experiences*. So it seems plausible that there are cases in which one knows what an experience E is without having had it.

At any rate, CB encapsulates the core thesis of what many people (lay people as well as many scientists and some philosophers – and me among them) find an absolutely compelling idea. And so I am going to focus on the rough and ready CB.

Before concluding this section it may be useful to say a few words about the notion of essence – or nature – that figures in CB. In fact some may be puzzled by the idea, built into CB itself, that *what an experience is* is the *essence* or the *nature* of the experience itself – and indeed one may also be puzzled by the very notion of (knowing an) essence. I think, however, that these worries can be answered.

Plato's readers know all too well the typical Socratic questions: «What is justice? What is holiness? What is knowledge?» and so on and so forth. The usual, and to my mind obviously correct, explanation of what Socrates was asking, is that he was looking for the essence or nature of justice, holiness or knowledge. So saying that what an experience is is the same as its essence or nature seems to be the obvious thing to say.

Ordinary linguistic practice reinforces the point. When a young student asks the chemistry teacher «What is water?», the teacher's reply is going to be «Water is H₂O», and in saying this she will specify the essence or nature of water. Or consider the question: «What is a sphere?». You, or the teacher, will respond to it by saying that a sphere is a three-dimensional object with all the points on its surface equidistant from its centre. And in so doing you – or the teacher – will be specifying the nature or essence of the sphere. Ordinary questions of the form «What is x?» immediately call for the specification of the nature/essence of x. So, again, saying that what an experience is is the same as its nature or essence seems to be a very natural thing to say.

But what is, after all, the nature or the essence of a thing? – one may ask. Well, along with many others,⁵ I suspect that the notion of essence is primitive and cannot be further analysed in more basic terms. But this is not to say that the notion is an empty one: I myself do not think so, and indeed in post-Kripkean philosophy talk of essence is taken as perfectly respectable. Furthermore, saying that essence, or nature, is a basic term is not to say that one cannot offer some clarifications about it. For a start, the examples of essence given above, those concerning water and the sphere, are clear enough to get a grip on the target notion. Moreover to the given examples one may add some standard and intuitive glosses: the essence – or the nature – of x is *what makes x what it is*, and it is linguistically captured by what philosophical tradition has called *real definition* as opposed to a merely nominal one.⁶

So being a thing constituted by H₂O molecules is the essence of water, that is what makes water what it is; and having all points on its surface equidistant from its centre is what makes a sphere what it is, its essence or nature. Moreover, being a thing constituted by H₂O molecules, and being a thing having all points on its surface equidistant from its centre are the real definitions of water and the sphere respectively – definitions that express their natures.

So, to conclude, saying that what an experience is is the same as its nature or essence is a very natural thing to say. And, following the vast majority of contemporary philosophers, I also think that it is possible to elucidate what essences or natures are by giving some ordinary examples and a couple of clarifying glosses.

■ Materialism implies the falsity of CB

Having explicitly stated the common belief CB, let us now move to the second point of the paper, which is the following: materialism implies the falsity of CB.

Consider, for a start, a standard example of a materialist theory of the mind: for every kind of mental state *M*, there is a kind of neural state *N* such that *M* is identical with *N*. For example, as the usual philosophical fiction has it, the kind *pain* is identical with the kind *C-fibers firing*: pain and C-fibers firing are one the same kind of thing. This is the ‘identity theory’ of the mind. If this theory is true, then the nature of pain can be known without having experienced any pain: this is because pain is identical to a brain state *N*, and the nature of a brain state can of course be known even when one’s brain has never been in that state. Therefore, according to the identity theorist – who is a paradigmatic materialist – CB is not true: it is not true, namely, that if one knows what experience *E* is, then one has or has had *E*.

Now consider functionalism which, at least among philosophers, is the most popular type of physicalism today.⁷ The core idea – as many readers would certainly know – is that a subject *S* is in a mental state *M* just when *S* is in a state playing a certain “causal-functional” role. Focusing on pain, let me briefly elaborate on this idea.

Functionalists say that when I feel pain some neural state in my head, *N1*, plays a certain causal-functional role (call it “the pain-role”): very roughly, *N1* has been caused by damage in my body, it produces anxiety and causes me to scream. And when my dog feels

pain, some different neural state in its head, *N2*, plays the same role: *N2* has been caused by damage in its body, produces anxiety and causes my dog to yowl.

Now, *N1* and *N2* are different neural states, and yet my dog and me share a common state: we are both in pain. What is, then, this property of *feeling pain* (or *having a pain*)?

Functionalists say that pain is a mental state a subject *S* is in precisely when *S* is in a state that plays the pain-role. And pain – what my dog and me share – is the property of having a property that plays the pain-role.

So, according to functionalism, this is the nature of pain, and it is simply obvious that even a subject that has never experienced pain may know this nature: what is needed is just to grasp what the pain-role is.⁸ Therefore, according to the functionalist – the most common type of materialist among current philosophers – CB is not true: it is not true, namely, that if one knows what experience *E* is, then one has had *E*.

What I have just discussed is really only a particular stripe of functionalism – what is sometimes known as “role functionalism” – but what I have said about this kind of theory is also true for the main alternative to role functionalism, namely so-called “occupant functionalism”.

When I feel pain, some neural state in my head, *N1*, plays the pain-role, and when my dog feels pain, some different neural state in its head, *N2*, plays the same role. According to occupant functionalism, my pain is identical with *N1*, and my dog’s pain is identical with *N2* – *N1* and *N2* being what *occupies* – or plays – the pain-role.

Again, my dog and me share the property of having or feeling pain; but, in this case, pain is not the shared property of having a property that plays the pain-role – as was the case for role functionalism. So what, in the present case, is the property of *having* or *feeling pain*?

This is a difficult question, which has not yet been clearly and convincingly answered. But perhaps being in pain, in this case, should be identified with the property of *having ei-*

ther N1 or N2 or any other physical state playing the pain-role.

In this case pain will be a disjunctive property – something like *being either red or blue or green* – which really is a bit strange. But what is important in this context is that the nature of this property would be knowable even without having, or having had, it. And there is no doubt, it seems to me, that any answer occupant functionalists offer to the question of what pain is will give us a property whose nature can be known without having (had) it.

Therefore, one may conclude, according to the occupant functionalist too, CB is not true: it is not true, namely, that if one knows what experience E is, then one has had E.

So we have seen that the three main materialist contenders in recent past and current philosophical debates – namely, role and occupant functionalism and the identity theory – imply the falsity of CB.⁹ And the fact that according to the main forms of materialism CB turns out to be false does not seem in any way accidental; indeed it is quite plausible that CB is false according to *all* forms of materialism.

This is, for example, what Dretske – who is, of course, a well-known materialist – is clearly suggesting in the following passage:

If the subjective life of another being [...] seems inaccessible, this must be because we fail to understand what we are talking about when we talk about its subjective states. If S feels some way, and its feeling some way is a material state of S, how can it be impossible for us to know how S feels? [...] If you know where to look, you can get the same information I have about the character of my experiences [...] For materialists, this is as it should be.¹⁰

I think that Dretske's point may be put this way. Consider again the neighbour who has never felt physical pain. According to materialism, even though she has never felt pain, she can access the nature of this mental state if it is instantiated by other people: if she knows where to look, she can know what

pain is. (And, moreover, it would seem plausible to say that she can know the nature of pain even better than you, if your only sources of information about the material state pain are your painful experiences). Generalising, what Dretske is saying is that a materialist is committed to the thesis that one can know the nature of an experience even without having had that experience.

And Dretske is certainly not the only materialist philosopher to have advanced this idea. To give one more example among many, consider what another well-known materialist, William Lycan has to say in this regard: «According to materialism every fact about every human mind is ultimately a public objective fact» – where Lycan opposes public objective facts to what he calls «intrinsically perspectival facts», facts, that is, that are knowable only by instantiating them.¹¹

Quite generally, as Howell has recently noted, the idea that the natures of conscious mental states can be known without instantiating those very states is a principle adhered to by all kinds of materialist philosophers, and indeed an implicit (and sometimes explicit) part of the physicalist worldview.¹²

So it seems quite correct to say that, according to materialists, the nature of an experiential mental state E is (in general) knowable without having had E itself.¹³ Hence materialism implies the falsity of CB.

■ The common sense case against physicalism – and the moral of the story

On the basis of what has been seen in the previous sections, an obvious argument against physicalism suggests itself immediately – and a *common sense* argument indeed, given the commonsensical Premise 1:

Premise (1): CB is true

Premise (2): Physicalism implies the falsity of CB

Conclusion: Physicalism is false.

The argument is an obviously valid one,

so if one wants to resist its conclusion there is only one option: deny at least one of the two premises.

Now, to my mind there are no objections to Premise (1) that are independent from physicalism. Of course, assuming physicalism one can argue against CB – for example using Premise (2) and modus ponens. But in the present context – the context of an argument against physicalism – this move would quite simply beg the question. So, it seems to me, there are no physicalism-independent reasons to deny CB; and, furthermore, CB itself is an immensely plausible idea: a man born blind, for example, just cannot know the nature of a blue experience. This, outside the philosophy (of mind) room, is considered as just plain truth.

Let us then focus on the second premise. Premise (2), as we have seen, seems to express a non-controversial commitment of any materialist doctrine worthy of the name. And yet, given that this premise, if accepted, would render materialism incompatible with such a widespread and plausible belief as CB, one might think that it should be rejected after all. Perhaps it is not really the case that every form of materialism concerning consciousness requires the negation of CB; perhaps one can believe in both materialism *and* CB. But how can this be? As far as I can see, there are three strategies one may think of as viable. In what follows I am going to (briefly) examine them in turn, showing that they actually are *not* viable options – and this examination will constitute the bulk of this section.

(1) *The appeal to phenomenal concepts* – As is well known, many contemporary upholders of materialist doctrines distinguish between two very different kinds of concepts – phenomenal and non-phenomenal ones – and they distinguish them in order to defend materialism from arguments such as the Mary-knowledge argument or the conceivability argument.¹⁴

A phenomenal concept is, roughly, a concept applied to a phenomenally conscious

experience E when one thinks of E in terms of what it is like to have it – *red sensation* may be an example of this kind of concept. Non-phenomenal concepts, on the other hand, are simply those concepts that do not satisfy the conditions for being phenomenal – among them, for example, there is the concept *horse* or the concept *sensation caused by the physical object in front of me*.

Now, one very common assumption among physicalist defenders of phenomenal concepts theories is that the concepts at issue are to be viewed as “perspectival” in that one cannot have a phenomenal concept of experience E, if one has never before had a token of experience E – you cannot have the concept *red sensation*, for example, if you have never before had a red sensation.¹⁵

This idea may strike one as rather similar to CB, given that CB presents as “perspectival” our knowledge of the nature of experiences. So perhaps one might want to pursue the admittedly vague suggestion that perspectival phenomenal concepts can somehow reconcile materialism and CB itself.¹⁶

Yet this is not just a vague suggestion but a misguided one too. Saying that phenomenal concepts can be had only via appropriate experiences is *not* to say that the natures of their referents are knowable only via experience. And indeed, according to the materialist upholders of perspectival phenomenal concepts, if one is placed in especially favourable conditions, one *can* know the physical natures of our experiences even without having instantiated them (and so without instantiating the relevant phenomenal concepts). The perspectival nature of phenomenal concepts does not, by itself, guarantee the perspectival nature of our knowledge of the nature of their referents, and so physicalist upholders of perspectival phenomenal concepts can coherently endorse, as they actually do, the negation of CB.¹⁷

(2) *Subjective physicalism* – Howell¹⁸ has recently put forward and defended a complex theory of consciousness whose main tenets

are, in a nutshell, the following two: (I) physicalism is true *because* phenomenal properties are metaphysically necessitated by the experienceless basic physical properties studied by physics; and (II) CB is true in that having experiences is necessary to know the natures of those experiences (and we do know these natures). This position, combining physicalism and CB, is called by Howell himself “subjective physicalism”.¹⁹

This is a stimulating and interesting theory indeed, and yet, interesting though it may be, I think that subjective physicalism is in fact an unstable position, which, at any rate, cannot properly be called a physicalist one. Briefly, here is why I think so.

According to Howell, we only know the nature of experience E by experiencing E itself; and we know the experienceless natures of basic physical properties through physical science – or, at least, we know that basic physical properties, by their very nature, are not experiential.

Now, Howell says that basic physical properties metaphysically necessitate phenomenal ones. If this metaphysically necessary link held by virtue of the natures of the (basic) physical and phenomenal properties, then, given our knowledge of these natures, we should be able to see a connection between these natures themselves. And yet, one cannot see any connection between the natures at issue: the nature of pain, say, knowable and known only via pain experiences, does not show any connection with the natures of the experienceless basic physical properties studied by physical science. So the metaphysically necessary link holding between basic physical and phenomenal properties is not grounded in the natures of these very properties, and the only alternative left open, it seems, is to say that the necessary metaphysical connection between the physical and the phenomenal is simply a *brute fact*.

But this is problematic in at least two respects.

(A) Typical cases of metaphysically necessary connections appear to be grounded in

the natures of the entities involved. Let me give a couple of examples. (1) It is metaphysically necessary that if it is a fact that x is a coloured object, then it is a fact that there is something coloured in a determinate way, red-coloured say. And *it is in virtue of the nature* of the fact of there being a coloured thing that, if this fact obtains, the fact that something is determinately coloured obtains as well. (2) It is metaphysically necessary that if there is water, then there is oxygen. And *it is by virtue of the nature* of water that, if there is water, then there is oxygen as well.

Again: typical cases of metaphysically necessary connections appear to be grounded in the natures of the entities involved. So, postulating a brute metaphysically necessary connection between physical and phenomenal properties is hardly credible: metaphysical necessity just does not seem the place for brute connections.

Indeed, some notable philosophers – among them Kit Fine and Bob Hale²⁰ – have argued that *every* metaphysical necessity is grounded in the natures of the entities involved. If so, the idea of a brute metaphysical necessity is not just hardly credible but simply a contradictory one – as I am definitely inclined to think.

(B) Even though one is willing to admit the coherence, and the existence, of a metaphysically brute necessitation between the physical and the phenomenal, the fact is that brute metaphysical necessitation between physical and phenomenal properties is (quite plausibly) incompatible with physicalism. As Terry Horgan has emphasised,²¹ physicalism requires more than simple metaphysical necessitation – or, as Horgan says, more than mere metaphysical supervenience. It also requires an *explanation* of the obtaining of this necessitation – what Horgan calls “superdupervenience”. But, of course, a brute metaphysical necessity in principle excludes any kind of explanation of its very obtaining. So any doctrine (as Howell’s) committed to a brute metaphysical necessitation between physical and phenomenal properties cannot

count as a proper form of physicalism.

That this is the case can also be shown by reference to C.D. Broad's position.²² Broad is standardly grouped among the archetypical emergentists in the philosophy of mind, and emergentism is usually viewed as different from any physicalist doctrine. But notice that Broad's emergentism is *defined* by the postulation of a brute metaphysical necessity between physical and phenomenal properties:²³ again, brute metaphysical necessity between the physical and the phenomenal is incompatible with physicalism.

(3) *Real Materialism* – The third way to try and combine physicalism and CB that I am going to consider is Strawson's so-called "*real materialism*".²⁴

According to Strawson when it comes to experiences «the having is the knowing».²⁵ And this implies that, if you know what an experience is, then you have had a token of that very experience. So Strawson subscribes to CB: the only way to know the nature of our experiences is by subjectively instantiating them.²⁶

To this, Strawson adds that physicalism is indeed true in that the basic physical items metaphysically necessitate the phenomenally mental, and this necessitation is not a brute fact but instead has an intelligible explanation.

What Strawson takes this explanation to be is the peculiar aspect of his position. Our conscious states are metaphysically necessitated by the basic physical entities because the categorical (i.e. non-dispositional) nature of the basic physical entities is constituted by phenomenal properties. This means, Strawson maintains, that there is something it is like for a basic physical entity to be that entity. And the conscious lives of fundamental physical items metaphysically determine, perhaps compose, our ordinary conscious lives.

So, if Strawson is right, it would seem that physicalism and CB can unproblematically coexist after all. But I think this is only apparent. To see this, let us consider some notable aspects of Strawson's position.

First, according to Strawson, phenomenal properties are *basic features of the world*, being the categorical natures of the building blocks of the (concrete) universe, namely of the basic physical entities.

Second, Strawson says that physics can have only one subject matter, namely the dispositions of basic physical entities – their phenomenal/categorical natures being unknowable by "third personal" investigation. So one may think that the world is basically inhabited by two kinds of properties: basic dispositions studied by physics, and basic phenomenal properties that are the categorical bases of those dispositions. But it may well be that dispositions are not to be viewed as actual features of the world: what one has is just a *façon de parler* whose actual truth-makers are not really dispositional properties, but categorical properties and lawful connections between them. If so, the basic reality of the world would be constituted only by phenomenal/experiential properties. And this is just a form of idealism, the doctrine according to which the only basic features of the world are mental items.

Now the fact is that materialism is obviously incompatible with the aspects of Strawson's theory I have just pointed out.

First of all, materialists emphatically reject the idea that the mental can be a fundamental feature of the world. And indeed this rejection is very plausibly *the* core idea of a materialistic theory of the mind. As Jackson and Braddon-Mitchell write:

There is a clear idea behind the materialist's thought that the mental is physical through and through. The idea is that the mental is a very complex arrangement of items having the kinds of properties [...] that non-sentient non-minded items have. The idea is that the building blocks of mind and feeling are items that lack mind and feeling. Just as a powerful car is made up of bits that are not powerful – it is the mode of composition that creates the power – so we minded and sentient be-

ings are made up of suitably arranged bits that are neither minded nor sentient.²⁷

Secondly, materialism – ruling out, as it does, the idea that the mental can be a fundamental aspect of the world – is obviously incompatible with any doctrine according to which the only basic features of the world are mental items; and this means that materialism is incompatible with any form of idealism.

Briefly, materialism strongly rejects the idea that the mental is fundamental and is incompatible with any form of idealism. But Strawson's position embraces the idea of the mental as fundamental, and it is compatible with a form of idealism. So it seems only fair to say that "Real Materialism" is not a form of materialism after all.²⁸

To sum up, and to conclude. We have seen, in section 3, that the main current forms of materialism imply the falsity of CB, and that well-known materialists, such as Dretske or Lycan, maintain the plausible idea that the same holds for all forms of materialism. In this section I have examined three doctrines allegedly able to combine physicalism and CB, and I have argued that they fail to do so. Given that there seems to be no other promising way to reject the plausible idea that materialism is incompatible with CB, I conclude that this idea is indeed true: materialism does imply the falsity of CB.

But if this is so, given the overwhelming *prima facie* plausibility of CB itself, it follows that the falsity of physicalism is *prima facie* overwhelmingly plausible. And this is, of course, another way of putting the common-sense argument against physicalism presented at the beginning of this section.

Is there a comparably strong *prima facie* case for materialism? No common-sense one, but some – even though not many – pro-materialist arguments have actually been presented. Among them there are the well-known 'causal closure argument', and the idea according to which the successful physicalist explanations of a great variety of phenomena given by natural science inductively

guarantees that the mind too will one day be so explained.

Now, as I said at the beginning of the paper, I have discussed these – and other – arguments at length elsewhere, so here I shall simply state that I have found them very weak and unconvincing. But even conceding they have some force, they are far from being obviously successful, and their force cannot cancel out the contrary and counterbalancing force of the common-sense argument against physicalism.

From this, the perhaps modest moral of the story follows straightforwardly. One should be rather suspicious of the mainstream assumption that materialism must be the default position in the study of consciousness. The force of the arguments in favour of this presupposition is, at the very least, counterbalanced by a strong, and commonsensical, reason to reject it. So there is at least one strong reason to consider non-materialistically committed theories of consciousness as serious contenders, on a par with currently orthodox materialist approaches to conscious phenomena.²⁹

Notes

¹ Two terminological notes. First, in this paper I am going to use the words "physicalism" and "materialism" as synonyms, and as doctrines concerning consciousness (this is a mere, and not uncommon, stipulation – see, for example, D. STOLJAR, *Physicalism*, Routledge, London 2010; nothing of philosophical importance will hinge on it). Second, "consciousness" is always to be intended as "phenomenal consciousness" (non-controversial cases of phenomenally conscious states being sensory perceptions, bodily sensations – such as pain and pleasure –, moods, and emotions).

² A. TOMASETTA, *Physicalist Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind (far less Warranted than Usually Thought)*, in: «Discipline Filosofiche», XXV, n. 1, 2015, pp. 89-111.

³ See F. JACKSON, *Epiphenomenal Qualia*, in: «Philosophical Quarterly», vol. XXXII, n. 127, 1982, pp. 127-136; F. JACKSON, *What Mary Didn't Know*, in: «The Journal of Philosophy», vol. LXXXIII, n. 5, 1986, pp. 291-295. Other versions

of the knowledge argument can be found, for example, in: S. ALEXANDER, *Space, Time and Deity*, Macmillan, London 1920; C.D. BROAD, *The Mind and Its Place in Nature*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1925; J.W. DUNNE, *An Experiment with Time*, Faber and Faber, London 1958; B.A. FARRELL, *Experience*, in: «Mind», vol. LIX n. 234, 1950, pp. 170-198; T. NAGEL, *What is it Like to be a Bat?*, in: «Philosophical Review», vol. LXXXIII n. 4, pp. 435-450; H. ROBINSON, *Matter and Sense*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982; B. RUSSELL, *Outline of Philosophy*, Routledge, London 1927.

⁴ I shall use “experience” as a synonym of “phenomenally conscious state”.

⁵ E.g.: K. FINE, *Essence and Modality*, in: «Philosophical Perspectives», vol. VIII, 1994, pp. 1-16; B. HALE, *Necessary Beings*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013; E.J. LOWE, *What is the Source of Our Knowledge of Modal Truth?*, in: «Mind», vol. CXXI, n. 484, 2012, pp. 919-950.

⁶ See G. ROSEN, *Real Definitions*, in: «Analytic Philosophy», vol. LVI, n. 3, 2015, pp. 189-209.

⁷ Functionalism, by itself, is not necessarily a physicalist doctrine, but, in what follows, I am going to focus on its physicalist versions – which, by the way, are perhaps the *only* versions seriously entertained by contemporary philosophers.

⁸ But doesn't this piece of knowledge require one to know about the nature of anxiety (among other things)? Yes, it does, but the nature of anxiety will be knowable by grasping the “anxiety-role” – and the nature of the mental states involved in this role can be known in the same way.

⁹ To the three theories just examined one may add the once popular doctrine of logical behaviourism, a theory standardly viewed as a form of materialism – even though, as Crawford has pointed out, this standard opinion is rather inaccurate from a historical point of view (see S. CRAWFORD, *The Myth of Logical Behaviourism and the Origins of the Identity Theory*, in: M. BEANEY (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 621-655). Roughly put, according to (“textbook”) logical behaviourism a mental state is identical to the members of a set of behaviours and/or behavioural dispositions. But, of course, it is not the case that one can know the nature of the members of a set of behaviours/behavioural dispositions only by instantiating them.

¹⁰ F. DRETSKE, *Naturalizing the Mind*, MIT Press,

Cambridge (MA) 1995, p. 65.

¹¹ W. LYCAN, *Representationalist Theories of Consciousness*, in: E.N. ZALTA (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Summer 2015 Edition), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/consciousness-representational/>>.

¹² R. HOWELL, *Consciousness and the Limits of Objectivity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 90.

¹³ «In general»: what if materialists think that beliefs are a kind of experience? Well, if having knowledge implies having belief, then, even for the materialist, one cannot know the nature of beliefs without having a belief. This would be a peculiar case, and the exception that confirms the rule.

¹⁴ Among the many materialists who defend a kind of phenomenal concept theory are: N. BLOCK, *Max Black's Objection to Mind-Body Identity*, in: T. ALTER, S. WALTER (eds.), *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 249-306; N. BLOCK, R. STALNAKER, *Conceptual Analysis, Dualism, and the Explanatory Gap*, in: «Philosophical Review», vol. CVIII, n. 1, 1999, pp. 1-46; C. HILL, *Imaginability, Conceivability and the Mind-Body Problem*, in: «Philosophical Studies», vol. LXXXVII, n. 1, 1997, pp. 61-65; C. HILL, B. MCLAUGHLIN, *There are Fewer Things in Reality than are Dreamt of in Chalmers' Philosophy*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», vol. LIX, n. 2, 1999, pp. 445-454; B. LOAR, *Phenomenal States*, in: «Philosophical Perspectives», n. IV, 1990, pp. 81-108; D. PAPINEAU, *Thinking about Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002; D. PAPINEAU, *Phenomenal and Perceptual Concepts*, in: T. ALTER, S. WALTER (eds.), *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 111-144; M. TYE, *Ten Problems of Consciousness*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1995.

¹⁵ See, for example, N. BLOCK, *Max Black's Objection to Mind-Body Identity*, cit.; D. PAPINEAU, *Phenomenal and Perceptual Concepts*, cit., and M. TYE, *Ten Problems of Consciousness*, cit.

¹⁶ To be clear: I am not attributing to the actual physicalist supporters of phenomenal concepts the idea that phenomenal concepts themselves can offer a way to reconcile physicalism and CB. I am just saying that someone *could* perhaps be attracted by this argumentative strategy. As I am going to show in a moment, a little reasoning suffices to show that this is in fact a dead end.

¹⁷ Supporters of phenomenal concepts are not

obliged to deny CB. The point is that physicalism *plus* phenomenal concepts does not imply or justify in any way CB itself.

¹⁸ R. HOWELL, *Consciousness and the Limits of Objectivity*, cit.

¹⁹ To be more precise, theses I and II characterise what Howell calls *exclusive subjective physicalism* (ESP) a position he presents as a second best with respect to what he calls *inclusive subjective physicalism* according to which there are no phenomenal properties distinct from, but metaphysically necessitated by, the basic physical ones: there are just some metaphysically necessitated properties with a “dual aspect”, physical and experiential – these aspects being necessarily related. The critical considerations I am going to develop in the main text against ESP apply quite straightforwardly to this dual-aspect-one-property theory as well, except for minor adjustments and complications. I have chosen to discuss ESP only, in order to avoid these unnecessary complications.

²⁰ K. FINE, *Essence and Modality*, cit.; B. HALE, *Necessary Beings*, cit.

²¹ T. HORGAN, *From Supervenience to Supedupervenience*, in: «Mind», vol. CII, n. 408, 1993, pp. 555–585.

²² C.D. BROAD, *The Mind and Its Place in Nature*, cit.

²³ On this topic see J. KIM, “*Supervenient and Yet Not Deducible*”: *Is There a Coherent Concept on Ontological Emergence?*, in: A. HIEKE, H. LEITGEB (eds.), *Reduction: Between The Mind and the Brain*, Ontos Verlag, Heusenstamm 2009, pp. 53–72, and my discussion in A. TOMASETTA, *Coscienza e Modalità*, Aracne, Rome 2012.

²⁴ G. STRAWSON, *Mental Reality*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1994; G. STRAWSON, *Real Materialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008.

²⁵ G. STRAWSON, *Real Materialism*, cit., p. 25 and p. 41.

²⁶ Here I have omitted some complications. In a considered statement of his views, Strawson says that having experience E gives one knowledge only of the nature of E in certain respects, meaning to say that not all essential properties of E are given to the experiencing subject (see, G. STRAWSON, *Panpsychism? Reply to Commentators with a Celebration of Descartes*, in: A. FREEMAN (ed.), *Consciousness and its Place in Nature*, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2006). Yet Strawson himself, quite

clearly, maintains that in order to have this partial knowledge of the nature of E the subject needs to instantiate E itself. So, *a fortiori*, if one knows E’s complete nature, then one has had E – which is CB.

²⁷ F. JACKSON, D. BRADDON-MITCHELL, *Philosophy of Mind and Cognition*, Blackwell, Oxford 2007, p. 20.

²⁸ I should add that Strawson is one prominent (and indeed pioneering) exponent of the doctrine now commonly known as “Russellian Monism”, of which Strawson’s own position is just one variety (see T. ALTER, Y. NAGASAWA (eds.), *Consciousness in the Physical World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015). Yet I think that my comments on Strawson’s theory can be adapted to every other form of Russellian Monism.

²⁹ As I have repeatedly said, the argument presented in this paper is a common-sense one, based as it is on the *commonsensical, intuitive or pre-theoretical* common belief CB. Yet one may think that simply saying – as I indeed say – that CB has *prima facie* very strong epistemic credentials (due to its being universally commonsensical and strongly intuitive) is not enough. What would be needed, one may object, is a supplementary theoretical justification. My take on the issue is the following. G.E. Moore famously listed some commonsensical truisms: we have experiences, such as the visual or the olfactory, and we have bodies; and our bodies have existed for some time, they have not been far from the surface of the Earth during all that time, they have been at various distances from various other objects and so on. I think that to this list of Moore’s one can easily add that a man born blind cannot know what a blue experience is, along with all other exemplifications of CB. Now, I doubt that these truisms admit of any proofs, but in any case I think the burden of proof is clearly on the deniers of them: until a disproof is available, one is entitled to hold them true. Furthermore, the fact that the status of CB is that of a very strong – and universally held – *prima facie* ‘intuition’ does not prejudice my intended aim, which was not to prove the falsity of physicalism. To repeat, what I wanted to say is simply this: there is an argument which is *powerful enough* to cast doubt on the idea that physicalism is the unquestionable starting point of any inquiry into the nature of the mind.