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Robert J. Howell

Consciousness and the Limits of Objectivity: The Case for Subjective Physicalism

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 208 pp.

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Howell's book develops and defends a stance on the Problem of Consciousness that he labels 'subjective physicalism'. The Problem of Consciousness revolves around the apparent inexplicability of conscious experience in physical terms. As Howell explains (p. 1), philosophers reflecting on this problem have divided into three main factions: i) 'hardliners' who claim that consciousness can be fully accounted for by the physical sciences; ii) 'epistemicists' who deny that the physical sciences can yield a full understanding of consciousness but who maintain that consciousness is ultimately physical; iii) 'non-physicalists' who hold that the inevitable failure of physical science to provide a full understanding of consciousness entails that Physicalism is false. Epistemicism is the most popular option, and Howell's own position falls firmly in this camp: '...subjective physicalism is the view that ontologically the world is entirely physical. Everything that there is supervenes upon the basic physical particles and properties. Nevertheless, not every feature of the world can be completely grasped by objective theorizing.' (p. 6) The key message of the book, however, is that most of Howell's epistemicist allies have dismissed the Problem of Consciousness too lightly. In particular, Howell argues that epistemicists must commit to '...a special epistemic relation [of] acquaintance...' and '...deny that any objective depiction of the world can be complete'. (p.2) Neither concession sits comfortably with the Physicalist outlook so Howell's arguments, if defensible, would have significant implications for the debate.

The book divides into three parts. Part I - 'Defining Physicalism' - consists of two chapters exploring the vexed issue of what exactly it means for Physicalism to be true. Chapter 1 asks 'What does it mean for a property to be physical?' (p. 13) Howell efficiently works through a number of familiar proposals, including appeals to ideal physics and 'via negativa' characterisations of the physical, but shows that none are satisfactory. He introduces a clear and effective definition of physicality according to which '[a] property is physical iff it can be fully characterised in terms of the conditions it places on the distribution of things in space over time.' (p. 24) In recognition of its Cartesian flavour, the definition is labelled 'Neocart'. Physicalists need not claim that all properties satisfy Neocart. Rather, they should hold that a certain set of *base* properties satisfy Neocart and that all non-basic properties are physical in virtue of being appropriately related to those base properties. The challenge taken up in Chapter 2 is to characterise this all-important relation. Rather than introducing a novel account, Howell takes the classic line that the relevant relation is *supervenience*. This view has fallen out of favour due to worries that '...it is compatible with

numerous non-physicalist doctrines.’ (p. 46) But Howell offers interesting and compelling reasons to think that the supervenience model actually excludes such non-physicalist positions. (pp. 49-53)

Part II of the book – ‘The Threat of the Subjective’ – revolves around Jackson’s (1982) famous Knowledge Argument against Physicalism. Epistemicists respond to this argument by conceding that Mary the super-scientist learns something new when she perceives red for the first time. But Mary does not, they claim, learn about non-physical properties. Rather, Mary learns something new about familiar physical properties - something that wasn’t available to her from within her prison. The key conclusion of Chapter 3 is that ‘...all of the epistemicist responses to the argument...ultimately collapse to subtle variations of the “acquaintance theory.” (p. 56) An acquaintance theory is one ‘...which holds that there is a way of knowing one’s own experiences that provides a grasp of those experiences that no other way of knowing can provide.’ (p. 73) Thus Mary is only able to achieve a full grasp of the nature of reddish experiences by being acquainted with her own tokening of such experience. Chapter 4 shows how acquaintance is at odds with objectivism. Objectivism says that an agent can achieve a complete understanding of the world without needing to adopt any specific point of view. If the acquaintance theorist is right that one cannot, for instance, fully understand the nature of reddish experiences without having a reddish experience oneself, then objectivism is false.

Objectivism is an *epistemic* thesis about the understandability of theories. What does the failure of objectivism mean for the *metaphysical* thesis made by Physicalists? In Part III – ‘Saving Physicalism’ – Howell argues that the falsity of objectivism is consistent with the truth of Physicalism. These three chapters develop Howell’s ‘subjective physicalism’. Chapter 5 defends subjective physicalism against the worry that ‘...if physicalism is true there is little substantive sense to be given to Mary’s learning anything upon exiting her room.’ (p. 102) The Presentation Argument against Physicalism suggests that if things *appear* in some new way to Mary when she escapes, there must be some previously unknown *property* in virtue of which they so appear. Here Howell challenges the assumptions this argument makes about the relationship between properties and epistemic space. A parallel move then allows him to rebut the ubiquitous Conceivability Argument.

Chapter 6 asks what exactly it is that Mary learns and considers how it is possible for the phenomenal facts to be *necessitated* by the basic physical facts without being *deducible* from a knowledge of those facts. A thoughtful and challenging account of the epistemic status of consciousness is offered which holds that ‘...our thoughts about phenomenal states involve them directly in a way that our thoughts about other things do not.’ (p. 132) Chapter 7 weighs up the costs and benefits of subjective physicalism, comparing it with the competing positions. Accepting subjective physicalism means accepting that consciousness can never be fully explained, tolerating the somewhat mysterious relation of acquaintance and conceding that physics and the objective sciences cannot ‘...give us a complete understanding of the world.’ (p. 172) Nevertheless, the crucial advantages it has over hardliner and non-physicalist positions mean that subjective physicalism ultimately wins out.

This book is concerned exclusively with how best to address the metaphysical problem of consciousness. Those looking for comments on the latest empirical data, reflections on our phenomenology or positive theorising about the origins of consciousness should look elsewhere. But for those interested in whether consciousness is compatible with Physicalism it has a great deal to

offer. Howell's arguments are precise and their presentation is, for the most part, very clear. The greatest strength of the book is Howell's meticulous attention to the interaction between epistemic and metaphysical considerations. The result is a credible account of where the anti-physicalist arguments go wrong and of the substantial costs entailed by an epistemicist response to those arguments.

Considering the complexity of the issues addressed, Howell is admirably succinct, cutting straight to the heart of each issue discussed. It might be felt that some sections would benefit from a more expansive treatment though. Given that the central theme of the book is the incompatibility of acquaintance and objectivism, it is surprising that we are not given detailed pictures of either. Howell does demonstrate that acquaintance and objectivism are incompatible, but until we are offered a comprehensive theory of the acquaintance relation and a thorough evaluation of the motivations behind objectivism, conclusively choosing between them will be difficult.

This is not a book of radical new proposals. Rather, Howell's project is to make the best of some familiar insights. We are given a decidedly 'old school' picture of physicality and Physicalism, a fairly standard reading of the anti-physicalist arguments and an extended defence of the majority view that the epistemic gap on which those arguments rely does not entail a metaphysical gap. What, then, does Howell's book contribute? One of the difficult things about epistemicism is that it comes in so many different forms (p. 72). In Chapter 3 Howell shows that disparate views such as the phenomenal concept strategy, the indexical response and the ability hypothesis all boil down to the same single idea that what Mary lacks in her monochromatic prison is knowledge-by-acquaintance. Similarly, in Chapter 6 Howell suggests that ineffability proposals and quotational models each go some way toward capturing how acquaintance underwrites phenomenal knowledge. The 'subjective physicalist' position Howell develops can thus be seen as a kind of distillation of decades of epistemicist theorising. This serves to show exactly what epistemicism has to offer and, more importantly, reveals the costs it entails. Indeed, Howell's honest reflections on the disadvantages of subjective physicalism are among the most interesting ideas in the book.

Howell's cost/benefit analysis identifies the key choice-points we face when confronting the Problem of Consciousness and concludes that subjective physicalism is preferable to its competitors. There may be reasons to think that Howell overestimates the cost of non-physicalism and underestimates the cost of subjective physicalism.

Regarding the costs of non-physicalism, Howell argues that non-physicalists are unacceptably committed to the causal inefficacy of phenomenal properties. This claim is integral to Howell's argument in Chapter 5 (p. 111) that Mary's knowledge does not involve metaphysically novel properties. It is also integral to his argument in Chapter 7 (p. 164) that subjective physicalism is preferable to property dualism, which is of particular importance given his observation that the two positions come surprisingly close to each other (p. 162). One problem here is that Howell takes it for granted that the familiar 'exclusion argument' against the efficacy of non-physical properties is sound. It could easily be objected that this argument is far from conclusive, resting as it does on disputable claims about the metaphysics of causation. A second problem is Howell's failure to

address ‘Russellian’ forms of non-physicalism.¹ These views claim that the structural properties described by the physical sciences are grounded in hidden intrinsic properties, and that these properties are either themselves phenomenal or are integral to the explanation of phenomenal properties. This oversight significantly limits Howell’s arguments because a) Russellian theories are specifically designed to avoid the exclusion argument on which Howell so heavily relies, b) the Russellian claim that physical entities have a hidden intrinsic nature looks particularly credible if we accept, as Howell does in Chapter 1, that the physical sciences describe only the structural properties of physical entities, and c) Russellianism has increasingly become the dominant stance among non-physicalists, meaning that Howell is working with an unrepresentative picture of the non-physicalist camp.

Regarding the costs of subjective physicalism, Howell concedes that physical theory cannot explain what it is like to experience redness but emphasises that this is consistent with Physicalism. One worry that Howell does not consider is that when Mary learns about reddish phenomenal qualities, she learns something about their nature that *precludes* the possibility of those qualities being physical. A tempting suggestion here is that qualitative redness is revealed as a *categorical intrinsic* property. Since physical properties are *dispositional* properties – as Howell effectively concludes in Chapter 1 – Mary can infer that qualitative redness is not one of the properties described by physical theory. Of course, Howell could resist this line of argument, but I imagine that in doing so he would come dangerously close to the ‘hardliner’ view of consciousness that he seeks to avoid. The kind of worry I’m pushing here is naturally captured through *qualia inversion* arguments. Curiously, these important arguments are not mentioned in the book.

Howell also concedes that the acquaintance relation is left unexplained (p. 147) but maintains that this is consistent with Physicalism. Again, it is not entirely clear that this is so. Acquaintance is an epistemic relation afforded by all and only phenomenal states. A strong case could be made for thinking that the mystery of consciousness is simply the mystery of how phenomenal acquaintance can arise from insentient matter. By presupposing that this relation is ultimately physical, Howell could be accused of skimming over the real problem. Interestingly, Howell does suggest that acquaintance itself is something we know through acquaintance, allowing him to re-apply his thesis that learning by acquaintance need not involve the introduction of any metaphysically new properties (p. 148). In parallel to my previous objection though, one might respond that acquaintance just isn’t the kind of thing that can transpire to be physical. As with so many disputes in the metaphysics of consciousness, it is not clear where the burden of proof lies here, or which side is begging the question against their opponent.

Overall *Consciousness and the Limits of Objectivity* is a thoughtful and stimulating book that insightfully identifies the fundamental issues that divide the metaphysics of consciousness and which reaches some credible and important conclusions about the commitments and consequences of epistemicist responses to the Problem of Consciousness.

References

¹ For an overview of the Russellian approach see Alter & Nagasawa (2012). Many regard the Russellian position as a form of Physicalism. However, Howell’s definition of Physicalism does not countenance such a position, as he explains in Chapter 1 (ft. 29).

Alter, T. & Nagasawa, Y. (2012) What is Russellian Monism?, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **19** (9-10), pp. 9-10.

Jackson, F. (1982) Epiphenomenal Qualia, *Philosophical Quarterly*, **32**, pp. 127-36.