PHENOMENAL CONCEPTS AS MENTAL FILES

Roberto Horácio DE SÁ PEREIRA
Universidade Federal de Rio de Janeiro

Summary
This paper is a defense of the so-called phenomenal-concept strategy, based on a new view of phenomenal concepts as special de re modes of presentation of the phenomenal character of experience. Phenomenal concepts can be explained in physical terms as mental particulars (as phenomenal files) created in the individual’s mind to pick out the phenomenal character of experience by representing certain physical properties as those represented by the experiences themselves (metarepresentation). They are individuated by two fundamental relations: the perceptual (acquaintance) relation the creature bears to the physical properties represented by its own experience and the relation the creature bears to itself (self-acquaintance) as the subject undergoing those experiences. Mary’s newly acquired phenomenal file presents the phenomenal character of her new experience of red by means of the new relation she bears to herself as the creature standing in the experiential relation to the color red.

To the memory of Fred Dretske.

Introduction

At the end of Jackson’s thought experiment, Mary finally leaves the black-and-white room and sees a ripe tomato for the first time, without the mediation of black-and-white monitors. Mary is an ingenious neuroscientist of the thirtieth century who has exhaustive knowledge about color and color vision, knowing all the physical facts. It seems undeniable, however, that she acquires a new bit of knowledge at the moment she leaves her confinement and sees the ripe tomato for the first time, namely, the knowledge of what it is like to see red. Now, the assumption that Mary
already has a complete set of all physical facts forces the physicalist to confront a problem. If Mary already knows all the physical facts about color and color vision, and, further, if she learns a new fact, the anti-physicalist conclusion is that physical facts do not exhaust all the facts. There must be at least one non-physical fact.

There are two classical physicalist reactions to the knowledge argument. First, rejecting the key assumption that after her release Mary learns something new, the physicalist might impugn directly the neo-dualist conclusion of the argument. A second response might be to admit that Mary makes a genuine discovery after she leaves her confinement under the assumption that she acquires new special phenomenal concepts of some property or fact she already knew under a physical concept in her confinement. Following Stoljar (2005), we can call this the phenomenal concept strategy (PCS). Proponents of this strategy argue that phenomenal concepts—our concepts of conscious states—have a certain, special nature. They are able to account for Mary’s epistemic predicament, showing at the same time that she makes an epistemic advance and that physicalism is true. Thus, proponents of the PCS make two related claims. First, they claim that phenomenal concepts are not just any ordinary concepts used introspectively to pick out the phenomenal character of one’s experience: they are special concepts in the relevant sense that one can only acquire when one undergoes some experience and attends to the phenomenal character of that very experience. Therefore, phenomenal concepts are not a priori entailed by any physical concepts. Second, they argue that the possession of phenomenal concepts with this special nature can itself be explained in physical terms.

According to the PCS, when Mary leaves her confinement and attends to the phenomenal character of her new experience of something red, she makes a genuine epistemic advance. However, her discovery is similar to the discovery of the ancient Babylonians that Phosphorus is Hesperus or to the discovery that Cicero is Tully. What she learns is that the phenomenal character of the experience of red that she now thinks under a new phenomenal concept is the same physical property she already knew in her black-and-white room under an old physical concept. Her phenomenal concept is special in the sense that she must undergo the experience of red and attend to the phenomenal character of that experience to acquire it. In this sense, her new phenomenal concept is not entailed a priori by any physical concept, but her newly acquired phenomenal concepts must also be explained in physical terms.