

Are Phenomenal Concepts Perspectival?

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1. Are phenomenal concepts perspectival? That is to say, is it the case that a subject can possess or acquire a phenomenal concept only if the subject has previously experienced that to which the concept refers? In this essay, I have a two-fold objective. First, I examine what follows if phenomenal concepts are assumed to be non-perspectival. Specifically, I consider what consequences such a view concerning the possession or acquisition conditions of phenomenal concepts has for a particular defense of physicalism against the Knowledge Argument. Second, I evaluate whether the linguistic phenomenon of under- or over-extension shows that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival.

2. Concepts, I shall assume, are psychological entities: they are structured mental representations that are the constituents of propositional attitudes. Phenomenal concepts are the concepts that we deploy when we introspectively examine, focus on, or take notice of the phenomenal character of our experiences. They refer to types of phenomenal experiences and they do so from an introspective perspective.¹ Phenomenal concepts are assumed to be *perspectival*. That is, the following thesis regarding their possession or acquisition conditions is typically granted:

(PER) Subject *S* is either in possession of, or has acquired, *C*, where *C* is a phenomenal concept, only if *S* has previously experienced that to which *C* refers.²

An acceptance of (PER) is thought to provide physicalists with a response to Jackson's Knowledge Argument (1982 and 1986).³ Suppose that Mary is a brilliant scientist who has been kept captive in a black-and-white room and who knows all physical facts about human color vision. The Knowledge Argument holds that there are facts about human color vision that Mary does not know. Mary, for instance, does not know what it is like to experience red. She will come to know of this fact only when she is allowed to have red experiences. According to the Knowledge Argument, Mary's epistemic predicament is indicative of something about the nature of our world. Since (a) Mary knows all physical facts about human color vision while in her black-and-white room, and (b) learns something new when she leaves her room, there must be facts about human color vision which are over and above physical facts. Consequently, physicalism is false. Alternatively, one might articulate the Knowledge Argument in the following manner. Knowledge of all physical facts does not allow an ideal rational agent such as Mary to deduce *a priori* all facts. And if Mary cannot deduce *a priori* phenomenal facts from physical facts, then phenomenal facts are not metaphysically necessitated by physical facts.⁴

Proponents of physicalism who accept that phenomenal concepts are perspectival have a response to the Knowledge Argument. They can grant that Mary is incapable of deducing *a priori* all phenomenal truths, that is, they can accept that while in her black-and-white-room Mary does not know certain truths about phenomenal experiences, and still deny that Mary's epistemic situation shows that physicalism is false. Assuming that phenomenal concepts are perspectival, Mary will not possess certain phenomenal concepts. But if Mary lacks certain phenomenal concepts and phenomenal concepts are the constituents of thoughts about the qualitative character of experience, then it is no surprise that Mary lacks complete phenomenal knowledge. Because Mary lacks certain phenomenal concepts, she is unable to entertain all

phenomenal truths. *A fortiori*, she is unable to deduce them *a priori* from her physical knowledge. The Knowledge Argument purports to draw a metaphysical conclusion (that physicalism is false) on the basis of an epistemic premise (that Mary does not know all that there is to know). By accepting that phenomenal concepts are perspectival, proponents of physicalism can accept the premise and deny the conclusion.

To defend physicalism from the Knowledge Argument, proponents of physicalism not only have to explain how Mary's epistemic predicament is consistent with the truth of physicalism, they must also provide a physicalistically acceptable account of what Mary learns when she leaves her room. Under the assumption that phenomenal concepts are perspectival, this is also possible. If phenomenal concepts are perspectival, then Mary will not possess all phenomenal concepts while in her room. She will acquire them only when she comes to have certain experiences. For instance, when Mary experiences a red object she will come to possess the phenomenal concept RED. In virtue of this newly acquired concept, she will be in a position to think of her experiences in a new way. Thus, what Mary acquires when she leaves the room is not knowledge of a new extensionally individuated fact. She knew all of those facts in her room. Rather, what she comes to know is an old fact under a new mode of presentation.⁵

3. A rejection of the claim that phenomenal concepts are perspectival causes serious trouble to the type of response that I have just sketched. First, if phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival, then, arguably, Mary will be in possession of them in her black-and-white room. Consequently, what explains her inability to deduce *a priori* all phenomenal truths from physical truths cannot be the fact that she lacks the requisite concepts. A different explanation of her epistemic situation must be provided. But even if such an explanation is found, an additional problem persists.⁶ If Mary is in possession of all phenomenal concepts while in her room, then

Mary will not come to acquire a new phenomenal concept when she exits the room. Thus, if one accepts that Mary does not have complete phenomenal knowledge in her room, then one is left without a physicalistically acceptable explanation as to what Mary learns when she leaves the room.⁷

In sum, holding that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival threatens to undermine a popular response to the Knowledge Argument. Of course, such a view regarding the possession or acquisition conditions of phenomenal concepts does not show that physicalists cannot provide an alternative response to the Knowledge Argument. Nor does it show that there is no available response to the Knowledge Argument that employs the nature of phenomenal concepts and that accepts that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival - I develop such a response elsewhere (Elpidorou 2011). Nevertheless, if phenomenal concepts turn out to be non-perspectival then what many proponents of physicalism have assumed to be an adequate response to the Knowledge Argument needs to be rethought.

4. What reasons do we have to think that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival? In *Consciousness Revisited: Materialism Without Phenomenal Concepts*, Tye argues that the fact that phenomenal concepts can be under- or over-extended suggests that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival. Specifically, Tye argues that if phenomenal concepts can be under- or over-extended, then phenomenal concepts can be possessed even if they are only partially understood. But if phenomenal concepts can be partially understood, then they are non-perspectival: one can possess or acquire them even if one has not antecedently experienced that to which they refer.

A language user *over-extends* a concept when he or she uses the concept to refer to a class of entities that is extensionally larger than the class of entities to which the concept is supposed to refer in the target language. Similarly, a language user *under-extends* a concept

when he or she uses the concept to refer to a class of entities that is extensionally narrower than the class of entities to which the concept is supposed to refer in the target language.⁸ Acts of under- or over-extension are commonplace within the linguistic habits of children of less than four years of age.⁹ A child over-extends the concept KITTEN, for instance, when he or she uses it to refer to all four-legged, furry animals. A child under-extends the same concept when he or she uses it to refer only to his or her own pet. The phenomena of under- and over-extension have attracted the attention of linguists, who have offered both explanatory models of these phenomena and accounts of their utility in communication and language development.¹⁰ But under and over-extension do not solely occur in the early stages of language development. Tyler Burge, for instance, notes that mature language users can also under- or over-extend color concepts. He writes:

People sometimes make mistakes about color ranges. They may correctly apply a color term to a certain color, but also mistakenly apply it to shades of a neighboring color. When asked to explain the color term, they cite the standard cases (for 'red', the color of blood, fire engines, and so forth). But they apply the term somewhat beyond its conventionally established range—beyond the reach of its vague borders. They think that fire engines, including *that* one, are red. They observe that red roses are covering the trellis. But they also think that *those* things are a shade of red (whereas they are not). Second looks do not change their opinion. But they give in when other speakers confidently correct them in unison (1979, p.82).

The linguistic phenomena of under- and over-extension give rise to two interesting results. First, subjects can possess a concept even if they only partially understand the concept. That is to say, under- or over-extension of a concept *C* by a subject is a good indicator of the fact that a subject both possesses and partially understands *C*. After all, under- or over-extension of a concept *C* both presupposes the deployment of *C* and requires that the subject is mistaken about the extension of *C*. Second, insofar as under- or over-extension suggests that subjects only partially understand the under- or over-extended concept, subjects who have under- or over-extended a concept should be willing to accept correction about their judgments concerning the extension of the concept. As Burge writes, subjects should “give in when other speakers confidently correct them in unison” (ibid.).

For Tye, the fact that phenomenal concepts can be under- or over-extended has rather important ramifications for their possession and acquisition conditions. If phenomenal concepts can be under- or over-extended, then a subject can possess phenomenal concepts even if he or she has only a partial understanding of them (see Tye 2009, pp. 63-4). But to what does partial understanding of a phenomenal concept amount? According to Tye, one can partially understand and thus possess a phenomenal concept, even if one has not antecedently experienced that to which the phenomenal concept refers. As he states:

[I]t is not necessary to have undergone the relevant experiences in order to possess such concepts [i.e., phenomenal concepts], any more than it is necessary to have undergone certain experiences in order to possess such concepts as the concept *gold* or the concept *beech* (ibid., p. 66).

He adds further:

It seems to me obviously correct to say that one cannot *fully* understand the term ‘red’ unless one grasps what it is like to experience red. But it does not follow from this that one does not possess the concept *red*. Concepts can be possessed and exercised in thought in the absence of full understanding (ibid., p. 72).

Hence, by granting (i) that under- or over-extension of *C* is a good indicator of partial understanding of *C*, (ii) that phenomenal concepts can be under- or over-extended, and (iii) that partial understanding of a phenomenal concept is possible without having experienced that to which the phenomenal concepts refers, Tye concludes that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival.¹¹ One can reconstruct Tye’s argument as follows:¹²

- P1** If a subject under- or over-extends concept *C*, then the subject only partially understands *C*.¹³
- P2** A subject may partially understand (and consequently, possess and deploy) a concept *C* even if he or she has not experienced that to which *C* refers.
- P3** If a concept *C* can be possessed by a subject without the subject having experienced that to which *C* refers, then *C* is non-perspectival.
- P4** Phenomenal concepts can be under- or over-extended.
- ∴ **C1** Phenomenal concepts can be partially understood by a subject.
- ∴ **C2** Phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival.

5. In evaluating the *under-/over-extension argument*, my focus will be on P2 - I grant the rest of the premises. P2 asserts that the criteria for concept-possession or concept-acquisition of *C* are the same, regardless of whether *C* is a phenomenal concept or a non-phenomenal concept. That is to say, P2 assumes that there exists a certain commonality between phenomenal and non-phenomenal concepts. But given the context in which the argument is provided, this assumption is unacceptable. The purpose of the argument is to show that phenomenal concepts do not form a special class of concepts for which the possession or acquisition conditions are unlike those of all other concepts. Hence, P2 cannot be taken for granted. Instead, an argument must be provided in its support. Proponents of the view that phenomenal concepts are special, insofar as a subject can come to possess or acquire them only if a subject has experienced that to which they refer, should not be perturbed by this argument. As it stands, the *under-/over-extension argument* fails to establish that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival. A crucial premise of the argument, namely, P2, is unsubstantiated.

One might respond to my criticism of the *under-/over-extension argument* by insisting that the argument does not require independent support. To wit, no additional arguments are needed in order to show that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival, for a combination of the premises found in the *under-/over-extension argument* entails P2. In order to demonstrate that P2 is entailed by the premises of the argument, one needs to show that phenomenal concepts are similar to non-phenomenal concepts in respect to the manner in which one can come to partially understand them and thus, to possess or acquire them. Do any of the premises in the argument establish the required similarity claim? P4 strikes me as the only plausible candidate.

Indeed, P4 is a step in the right direction. It asserts that phenomenal concepts, just like other non-phenomenal concepts, can be under- or over-extended. P4, however, does not suffice

to establish the requisite conclusion. P4 only shows that both classes of concepts can be under- or over-extended. What it fails to show is that both classes admit of the same requirements for concept-possession or concept-acquisition. Under- or over-extension only shows that a subject's application of a phenomenal concept admits of a correction. If one equates under- or over-extension with partial understanding, this also shows that one can have partial understanding of phenomenal concepts. Crucially, however, P4 does not show that one can have partial understanding of a phenomenal concept *without already having had the relevant experience*.

The same point can be put as follows. Were P4 such that it entailed P2, then it would be possible for someone who has never experienced red to over-extend the phenomenal concept RED. How would that be possible? Consider the following example. Abby, who is ignorant of visual science, has been kept confined such that she has seen only the following three colors: blue, green, and orange. Today, she is shown an object, the color of which is in between red and orange (yet, more red than orange), and is asked to state what it is like to experience the color of this object. Suppose that Abby asserts that *this* (i.e., the color of the object being shown) is what it is like to experience orange, where in fact the experience is that of seeing red. Assuming that we accept Abby's response at face value, the example still comes short of showing that one can over-extend phenomenal concepts without having had the relevant experience. It rather shows that once the subject has the phenomenal concept, the subject can over-extend it. In this example, it is the phenomenal concept ORANGE and not RED that is over-extended.

Suppose that we alter the above example so that (a) Abby still has seen only those three colors, yet now she also knows that red is a 'deeper' version of orange, and (b) Abby is shown a different object, the color of which is more orange than red. Suppose that in this example Abby

asserts that the object being shown is what it is like to experience red. Does this show an over-extension of the phenomenal concept RED?

In order for Abby's response to show over-extension we need to assume that Abby, in asserting that '*this* is what it is like to experience red,' has deployed the phenomenal concept RED. But even if we accept that Abby has deployed the phenomenal concept RED, there is nothing in this example that provides support for the view that Abby has acquired the phenomenal concept RED *non-experientially*. Granted, if she over-extends the concept, then she must already possess the concept. But that fact by itself does not tell us *how* she came to possess the concept.¹⁴

6. One could try to defend the *under-/over-extension argument* differently: namely, one could hold that although the argument does not establish the requisite conclusion, the conjunction of the argument and other widely accepted premises does. Specifically, one might argue that Burge (1979) and Putnam's (1975) arguments for anti-individualism of mental content provide independent support for P2. Hence, although the argument as stated above does not by itself give C1, this does not matter, for coupled with the findings of Burge and Putnam the argument does succeed.

An appeal to Burge and Putnam's findings as direct support for P2 is to no avail. To be clear, that is not because I am denying their findings. The response is unsatisfactory for another reason. Properly speaking, P2 is the conjunction of two distinct premises.

P2_{NP} A subject may partially understand (and consequently, possess and deploy) a non-phenomenal concept C_{NP} even if he or she has not experienced that to which C_{NP} refers.

P2_P A subject may partially understand (and consequently, possess and deploy) a phenomenal concept C_P even if he or she has not experienced that to which C_P refers.

In light of this disambiguation, if one is persuaded by Burge and Putnam's arguments, then only P2_{NP} is granted. P2_P does not follow, as if a corollary, from those arguments. But if what is established is only P2_{NP}, then it should be clear that C1 does not follow: whereas P4 is a premise about phenomenal concepts, P2_{NP} is not.

Suppose, however, that one agrees that it does not follow immediately from Putnam and Burge's conclusions that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival. And yet one insists that the same sorts of arguments that Putnam and Burge use could be applied to phenomenal concepts (see, for instance, Ball 2009). Does this reaction salvage the *under-/over-extension argument*? It does not. Recall that what the essay sets out to examine is whether under- or over-extension of phenomenal concepts shows that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival. The two-fold suggestion that social externalism might be true for phenomenal concepts, and that this fact shows that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival, has no bearing on whether the possibility of under- or over-extension is symptomatic of non-perspectivalism. In fact, if the only way to obtain P2 is by arguing that the arguments of Putnam and Burge are applicable to phenomenal concepts, then this would support my claim that the *under-/over-extension argument* is in need of independent support.

7. Tye could protest that his remarks on under- or over-extension of phenomenal concepts were intended merely to show that phenomenal concepts can be partially understood and not that they can be possessed and acquired non-experientially. Suppose that we do limit the argument's

scope in this way. This still would not vitiate the fact that the move from C1 to C2 is substantial and in need of additional arguments. Under- or over-extension, thus, does not suffice to show that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival. If one is convinced that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival, one needs to look to other arguments in support of that contention.

¹ Some clarifications are in order. First, for the purposes of this essay, I assume that phenomenal concepts refer to types of phenomenal experiences and not to experienced properties of objects. Nothing substantial rests on this assumption. Second, I take phenomenal concepts to be what Chalmers calls *pure phenomenal concepts* (Chalmers 2004). Hence, not all concepts that refer to types of phenomenal experiences are phenomenal concepts. A phenomenal concept picks out its referent “directly in terms of its [the referent’s] intrinsic phenomenal nature” (ibid., p 272.) See also Levin (2007, p. 89). Finally, one might suggest that if phenomenal concepts turn out to be non-perspectival, then there are no (pure) phenomenal concepts. This suggestion is made explicitly in Ball (2009). Cf. Tye (2009). I discuss how this view relates to the Knowledge Argument in note 6.

² There might be counterexamples to (PER). For instance, one might come to possess a phenomenal concept by a neurosurgical intervention (see Tye 2000). Or, perhaps, some phenomenal concepts are innate. I put aside such complications.

³ There are proponents of physicalism who maintain that the nature of phenomenal concepts can be used to defend physicalism not only from the Knowledge Argument but also from the Conceivability and Explanatory Gap arguments. See, e.g., Hill (1997), Hill and McLaughlin (1999), Papineau (2002), Levin (2007), and Balog (2012). Since, typically, such responses to the Conceivability and Explanatory Gaps arguments do not require that phenomenal concepts are perspectival, I will not consider them here.

⁴ This latter formulation of the Knowledge Argument in terms of *a priori* deducibility and necessitation is presented in Jackson (1995) and developed in Chalmers (2004).

⁵ Not everyone agrees that Mary’s epistemic progress is exhausted by her acquisition of a new way of conceiving an old fact. For instance, it has been argued that if Mary comes to possess a new phenomenal concept and consequently comes to know an old fact under a new mode of presentation, then she *also* learns a new fact. Hence, the provided explanation of Mary’s epistemic progress fails to be compatible with physicalism after all. See, e.g., Chalmers (2004) and Thau (2002); cf. Loar (1997).

⁶ Proponents of what is known as “The Phenomenal Concept Strategy” hold that the reason why Mary cannot perform the deduction *a priori* is because phenomenal concepts are conceptually isolated of physical or functional concepts. Hence, even if Mary were to possess the necessary phenomenal concepts she would still be incapable of deducing all phenomenal facts *a priori*.

⁷ The same conclusion holds even if the claim that phenomenal concepts are non-perspectival is understood to mean that there are no (pure) phenomenal concepts. If there are no (pure) phenomenal concepts, then the fact that Mary lacks those concepts cannot explain the fact that she cannot perform the deduction. Furthermore, since there are no (pure) phenomenal concepts, Mary cannot acquire such concepts when she leaves her room.

⁸ The provided description of under- or over-extension is admittedly incomplete. It cannot simply be the case that every time that a subject sincerely asserts that *k* is an instantiation of *C*, where *k* is not part of *C*’s extension, the subject over-extends *C*. A certain relationship between *k* and what is assumed to fall under *C* must also hold. That is to say, calling a table a submarine does not seem to be an act of over-extension. Calling a nightstand a table, however, might qualify as an act of over-extension, for there is a certain relationship (one that I will not attempt to spell out here) between nightstands and tables. Usually, they both have top flat surfaces and legs, and they provide a surface on which objects can be placed.

⁹ See, e.g., Clark (1973 and 1993), Dromi (1987), and Jay (2003).

¹⁰ See Bloom (1973), Clark (1978 and 2009).

¹¹ It is important to point out that Tye uses the term “deferential” instead of the term “non-perspectival.” I have chosen to use the latter term because the former, at least as it occurs in Tye (2009), is ambiguous. The claim that a concept *C* is deferential can mean any either (a) that one can possess *C* without having a full understanding of *C*, or

(b) that one can possess *C* without having previously experienced that to which *C* refers. Since what I am interested in is (b), the term “non-perspectival” is the more appropriate.

¹² Here is the textual evidence in support of my reconstruction of Tye’s argument: P1 is stated in the paragraph that spans pages 63-4; P2 is granted in the first full paragraph of page 66 (see also page 72); and P3 is a definitional premise. All references are taken from Tye (2009). Ball (2009) briefly makes the same argument.

¹³ Given that under- or over- extension is not an infallible guide to partial understanding, P1 should state the following: If a subject under- or over-extends concept *C*, then it is likely that the subject only partially understands *C*. For present purposes, I ignore this complication.

¹⁴ In fact, Abby could have come to possess the phenomenal concept RED in the following way: by having seeing orange objects and by knowing that red is a “deeper” version of orange, she could have imaginatively recreated the color red. Of course, by doing so, Abby would have undergone the experience-type to which the phenomenal concept RED refers. This way of coming to possess the relevant phenomenal concept is consistent with the claim that phenomenal concepts are perspectival.

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