The Epistemic Value of Conscious Acquaintance: A Problem for Reductive Physicalism

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This talk is based on my paper “The Significance Argument for the Irreducibility of Consciousness”, Philosophical Perspectives 2017
Conscious acquaintance has value to us, in part, because of its epistemic significance.

Frank Jackson’s Mary comes out of her black and white room.

Mary now knows what red is like!

Mary now has a special immediate reason to believe red thing is there.
• Goal: reductive physicalists face a deep problem concerning epistemic value – “problem of multiplicity”. Connects up with Geoff and Brian.

• I begin with preliminaries.
I. Preliminaries
Consciousness has relational structure – “acquaintance”

- For Mary to have tomato-like experience = for her to stand in “conscious-of relation” to ostensible state red&round

- Necessary connection between phenomenology and what properties she’s conscious of.
This relationship is kind of spooky!

You stand in **this very special relationship** to the red quality, unlike anything else in nature.

Can this relationship be explained in physical terms?
Reductive physicalists say “Yes”

The red “quale” JUST IS some super-complex physical property, characterizable in austere physical language.

The conscious of relation JUST IS a physical relation, characterizable in austere physical language.

In general, all reduces to austere physical facts. Lewis, Sider, Dorr, Lee, Dretske, Tye. Beautifully simple vision. But I am going to argue: it just doesn’t work.
My target is only **reductive** physicalism, not physicalism in general.

In fact, one response is to reject reductive physicalism and move to “non-reductive” grounding physicalism (Schaffer).
For concreteness, I will focus on single version of reductive physicalism: “tracking reductionism” about consciousness

1. Color qualia are external. = reflectances.
2. Conscious-of relation is a mere “causal-tracking relation”
3. Radically externalist!
In more detail, by “tracking relation”, I mean Neander, Fodor, Dretske. For you to be conscious of the quality red just is for you to be in some internal state or that that has the function of tracking that color (understood as reflectance) and for that state to be poised influence your cognitive system.
The problem I’ll develop for reductive physicalists is general

• I will focus on reductive externalist “tracking theory” about consciousness.

• But the problem carries over to “internalist” forms of reductive physicalism.
Plan for rest of talk:

_initial: many variant tracking relations that have slightly different definitions. All good candidates to be conscious-of._

“conscious-of” — Tracking relation14
Tracking relation15
Tracking relation16
Then question for reductive physicalists: which tracking relation is conscious-of, which has special epistemic value?

- “Indeterminacy View”
  - Immediately rule out

- “Arbitrary Identities View”
  - Epistemic Value
2. Initial point: multiplicity of “tracking relations” that are good candidates to be conscious-of relation
For example, consider Mary viewing tomato

Tracking reductionism holds:
The red *quality* = a reflectance.

The determinable qualitative type
COLOR QUALITY
= the determinable physical type
REFLECTANCE.
The tomato has multiple types of reflectance properties candidates to be red quality

• *To have a photonic reflectance* is to reflect **PHOTONS** in certain proportions.

• *To have a functional reflectance* is to reflect, in certain proportions, *some particles or other playing certain functional roles*. This is a broader reflectance property is realizable in other worlds where the physics of light is somewhat different.
So, two reflectance properties (candidates). Also two corresponding tracking relations (candidates).

Reductive physicalists face the question: is the more liberal functionalist theory right, or is the restrictive "photonic" view right?

Radically different verdicts about what kinds of experiences our counterparts have in other "possible worlds" where the physics of light is different.

Yablo causation vs productive causation
Second Illustration of Multiplicity: “Double Earth”.

• Every object is impenetrable but contains an object within it (like Russian doll).
• Assume that color qualia in the word. Every “outer” object is black/white. Every outer black object contains a red inner object. Every white outer object contains a green inner object…
• The color of inner object and that of the outer object are causally yoked together by way of a natural, super-fast chemical process.
Multiple tracking relations candidates to be conscious-of

Imagine “Martha” views outer black object

“Tracking-17”

Visual system causally tracks BOTH. Which one is she conscious of? Karen Neander. Won’t get into detail.

“Tracking-18”

Tracking17: Only ever conscious of B&W – just like Frank Jackson’s Mary. She’s never R&Q just below the surface, even though her visual system tracks them.

Tracking18: Martha is conscious of inner red. Outer black object just part of causal process, like her retina. If tracking reductionists like Neander’s “distality principle”, which favors most distal element.
To sum up: when you view tomato & are conscious of red, multiple tracking relations

"conscious-of"

Tracking₁₇ₚ
Tracking₁₇₇ₜ
Tracking₁₈ₚ
Tracking₁₈₇ₜ
How should reductive physicalists respond to multiplicity?

“Radical Indeterminacy View”
Immediately rule out

“Arbitrary Identities View”
Epistemic Value
3. Could Reductive Physicalists Respond to Multiplicity by Accepting Radical Indeterminacy?
To explain this view, assume familiar “supervaluationist” approach to indeterminacy.

Go back to **Martha on double earth** viewing outer black object

“To explain this view, assume familiar “supervaluationist” approach to indeterminacy.

In our mouths and Martha’s, “conscious-of” is “indeterminate in reference” between tracking 17 and tracking 18.

This means it’s super-true that Mary is conscious of *black or red*, but it’s *indeterminate* which one.

This in turn means phenomenology radically indeterminate. You cannot imagine her situation! *Superposition!*
Ted Sider (2001): reductive physicalists committed to such radical indeterminacy in other cases - personal identity.

*Roughly*: reductive physicalists think Martha and Mary and you and I are just like robots: austere physical facts are all the facts – atoms in the void.

So imagine knowing all such facts and trying to “radically interpret” their use of “conscious of”, “that quality”

Nothing in their use that could uniquely select or “point to” one of the multiple candidates rather than all the others as the referent of such expressions.
Immediately rule out radical indeterminacy view! For Martha, it’s determinate either, but indeterminate which.

If reductive physicalist cannot respond to multiplicity by accepting radical experiential indeterminacy, they need another response.
How rule out phenomenal indeterminacy? *Spooky scanner for detecting modal truths (Geoff)?*

My answer: we similarly know can’t be indeterminate whether tadpole or meteorite like that. No spooky faculty required there!
4. Second option for Reductive Physicalists: Responding to Multiplicity by Accepting “Arbitrary Identities”
Analogy.

All people
“is bald”

Has less than $10^{16}$ hairs
Has less than $10^{17}$ hairs
Has less than $10^{18}$ hairs
Has less than $10^{19}$ hairs
Has less than $10^{20}$ hairs

There is a precise hair condition such that “is bald” in all of our mouths refers to it and it alone. Even though nothing about use uniquely “points to” it.
Somewhat like Williamson, reductive physicalist might respond to multiplicity with arbitrary identities.

“conscious-of”

“red quality”

There is a precise tracking relation such that all of uses ‘conscious of’ to refer to it and it alone. Even though nothing about use unique “points to” it.
If Conscious of = Tracking17f, avoid radical experiential indeterminacy

It’s determinate that, in a “Newton world” where objects reflect corpuscles instead of photons, our counterparts are conscious of same color qualia – differently realized.

MARTHA ON DOUBLE EARTH

“Tracking-17”

“Tracking-18”

Martha is like Mary
Guard against mistaken understanding of arbitrary identities reductive physicalism!!

Rather, the view is that there are all these tracking relations that are barely different in their definitions. None stands out. Martian. It just so happens that one of them is what we are talking about when we talk about consciousness.
Arbitrary identities reductive physicalism faces many problems.*

I’ll develop a problem about how it might accommodate the the **Intrinsic Epistemic Value of consciousness**.

(*For “is bald”, Williamson defends extreme “semantic instability”. But I’m assuming “arbitrary identities” reductive physicalist instead accepts semantic stability for consciousness-related vocabulary, because here instability totally implausible. It’s hard to see how this might be explained – looks lucky. Many other problems.*)
To begin with, what I mean by “intrinsic epistemic value”?

- *For example:* It’s in nature of the conscious-of relation that, if you bear it to ostensible state of something being red and round — if it seems to be RIGHT THERE - then you have a reason to believe it obtains. *(Reliabilism fails!)*

- We *just know* this, just like we *just know* that in nature of pain to give us a reason to desire it stop.

- **Geoff Lee:** *How* do we know? My answer: We know some “synthetic” truths a priori. We know that experience of red *necessarily* resembles experience of reddish orange.
Suppose we combine intrinsic epistemic value with arbitrary identities reductive physicalism.

**We accept:** conscious-of relation has intrinsic epistemic value.

**We also accept:** conscious of $= \text{Tracking}_{17_f}$.

Then we must also accept: Lo and behold, **Tracking$_{17_f}$** has intrinsic epistemic value. E.g.
Here now is the problem for arbitrary identities form reductive physicalism

There are multiple tracking relations. Nearly identical.

Tracking₁⁷_p

Tracking₁⁷_f “conscious”

Tracking₁⁸_p

Tracking₁⁸_f

If one of them has intrinsic epistemic value, do the others have intrinsic epistemic value too?
Suppose first “Yes” answer. “Deflationary pluralism” (Geoff)

To see why problematic, Martha. Predicts overgeneration of reasons

“Tracking-17”

By virtue of tracking-17 outer black but not inner red, Martha is conscious of black and not red, and has an immediate reason to believe black thing there.

“Tracking-18”

By virtue of tracking18 the inner red – even though she doesn’t know it and isn’t conscious of red – she has equal immediate reason to believe an inner red object is there.
That is a false prediction

If this is really what it is like for Martha, and if she is not and has never been conscious of red, she has NO immediate reason to believe a red thing is there!!!!
Likewise deflationary pluralism implies

Mary is conscious of only of functional reflectance, but she also has equal reason to believe photonic reflectance out there (not under that MOP).

False prediction!
At this point, arbitrary identities reductive physicalist might move “anti-pluralist” view.

There are all these very similar tracking relations – determinates. The conscious of relation is identical with only one of them. And is it ONLY that relation that has intrinsic epistemic value. The rest are **epistemic garbage.** “The normative singularity view.”
The normative singularity view avoids over-generation of reasons

By virtue of tracking-17 outer black but not inner red, Martha is conscious of black and not red, and has an immediate reason to believe black thing there.

Mary also tracks18 the inner red. But since tracking18 has no epistemic value at all, Mary has no reason to believe a red thing is there.
Although avoids overgeneration of reasons, normative singularity view faces another problem: normative singularities are \textit{a priori} objectionable.

Imagine analogous “normative singularity” view about pain.

\[
PAIN_{16} \rightarrow \text{No Reasons}
\]

\[
PAIN_{17} \rightarrow \text{Reasons}
\]

\[
PAIN_{18} \rightarrow \text{No Reasons}
\]

\[
PAIN_{19} \rightarrow \text{No Reasons}
\]
Another Example (Pautz 2017, Hawthorne forthcoming)

• Imagine a sorites sequence involving baldness: one hair at a time.

• Imagine following view: everything is OK, until the precise moment you only have 1017 hairs left.

• At this point, there’s a normative singularity. Having 1016 hairs left is ok. But having 1017 left provides you with a giant reason to be depressed.

• Suddenly your life is over and nothing matters anymore.
The normative singularity view about tracking relations is analogous

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tracking}_{17_p} \\
\textbf{Tracking}_{17_f} \\
\text{Tracking}_{18_p} \\
\text{Tracking}_{18_f}
\end{align*}
\]

reasons for belief

If we reject normative singularities in these other cases, doesn’t consistency demand we reject it here?
If you like principles, problem is normative singularity view violates:

**Small Difference Principle:** If properties F and G are intrinsically extremely similar determinates of a common determinable, then it can’t be that F necessarily grounds **Strong Reasons** and G grounds **None At All**.

(You might think sorites sequences make a problem. I disagree. See Hawthorne “Moral Vagueness and Epistemicism”.)
Arbitrary Identities Reductive Physicalism Faces a Puzzle about Epistemic Value

Deflationary Pluralism
Overgeneration of Reasons

Normative Singularities
Final problem for arbitrary identities reductive physicalism. Consider BIG DIFFERENCE claim:

**IF**

someone is *conscious of* black but she’s *NEVER* been conscious of red (or even heard about it)

**Then**

her *relation* to black is very different from her relation to red
Geoff Lee questions, but similar things about non-mental things

We also know nothing is at all similar to a color but another color.

So there's a big difference between colors and noncolors.
“While Martha is conscious of the color black, she stands in a nearly identical relation to the color red – even though she is not conscious of red.”

Conscious-of = tracking-17. And that nearly = tracking-18.

Arbitrary identities reductive physicalism violates the Big Difference Claim
Absurd. First-person!!! Imagine you = Martha.

“You are conscious of the color black. You are not at all conscious of the color red. Still, while you are conscious of the color black, you stand in a nearly identical relation to the color red.”

You just know this speech to be false by introspection. All the difference in the world!!!
5. Conclusion
**Sum up:** In response to multiple candidates problem, reductive physicalists about consciousness:

- **Radical Experiential Indeterminacy**
  - Immediately rule out
- **Arbitrary Identities**
  - Problem about Epistemic value
- **Overgeneration of reasons**
- **Normative singularity**
What’s the right moral? Reject reductive physicalism

• The argument for it isn’t all that strong: given “causal closure”, it’s the simplest view.

• Faces many problems – not just the ones in this talk.

• When the problems for a view really pile up, at some point it becomes reasonable to reject it.

• And there’s an alternative.
My alternative view

• Follow Russell: conscious-of relation is an “irreducible”, primitive relation.
• Not identical with some specific crappy tracking relation, where there are lots of similar relations in the vicinity.
• *This allows us to say that it is RADICALLY DIFFERENT from all other relations nature.*
• Accept UNIQUE EPISTEMIC VALUE in a way that’s in line with the Small Difference Principle!!!
• Compatible with grounding physicalism.