

# Phenomenal Concepts and Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument

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## Abstract

We argue that phenomenal concepts are consistent with Wittgenstein's private language argument.

### 1. Introduction

In a recent paper Papineau (2011) argues that “phenomenal concepts” are inconsistent with Wittgenstein's private language argument. At first glance this claim is plausible, because it is plausible that the use of phenomenal concepts supposes the use of introspection, and Wittgenstein, as it is thought, argued against introspection, which from his point of view is not public and, which is equivalent for him, meaningless.

Unlike some Wittgensteinians who reject the phenomenal concepts, Papineau, however, thinks that the problem is with Wittgenstein's argument. According to him, Wittgenstein is setting the bar for meaningfulness too high, so that only the use of an exterior “objective” criterion would allow making the act of identification of an experience meaningful.

We will argue that such understanding of Wittgenstein is very restrictive and Papineau's own argument in favor of phenomenal concepts can be understood as Wittgensteinian.

### 2. Frank Jackson's argument and phenomenal concepts

A famous thought-experiment by Frank Jackson (1986) is as follows. Imagine a scientist, Mary, who knows everything there is to know about the experience of seeing red from the scientific third-person point of view. However, Mary has spent her whole life in a black and white laboratory and has never seen colored things. One day she is shown a red rose, and she learns something new, namely what it is like to see something red.

On the basis of his thought-experiment Jackson proposes the following argument in favor of dualism of properties.

Before Mary is shown a rose she knows everything about the material properties of the experience of seeing red (premise 1). Then she learns that this experience has one more property – the phenomenal aspect of the experience, that is, what it looks like to see something red (premise 2). Therefore the new property she learns about is a non-material one (conclusion).

Papineau's point of view is that the intuition that Mary gains some new knowledge neglects a distinction between concepts and properties. He argues that when Mary is shown a red rose she learns something new at the level of concepts, not at the level of the properties of the experience of seeing red. So, the premise 2 would be false.

More precisely, for Papineau, first of all, Mary acquires a new – phenomenal – concept, and then she learns that this concept refers to the experience of seeing red, that is, has the same referent as her scientific concept of the experience of seeing red. This is knowledge at the level of concepts. Such a materialistic position is *conceptual dualism*.

However, conceptual dualism is not a satisfactory position, because the so-called explanatory gap problem, that is, the problem of explanation of phenomenal properties of experiences in terms of their neurological properties, moves to the conceptual level. In addition, one can argue that conceptual dualism entails dualism of properties and, therefore, cannot be a materialistic solution to the problem. One can also argue that new knowledge cannot be purely conceptual. There is always a new property which a phenomenal concept refers to. Therefore, when Mary is shown a red rose she indeed learns about a new property of the experience. This does not necessary imply that dualism is true, since one can argue that in her black and white laboratory, being deprived of any phenomenal experience, Mary cannot gain knowledge about all material properties of the experience of seeing red (this is our position), or one can argue, as Lewis and others did, that she does not gain any new knowledge when she is shown a red rose.

For the physicalists Lewis and Nemirow Mary acquires the capacity of a direct identification of the experience of seeing red, that is, some “know-how”, not “knowledge that”. However this view does not take into account the properly phenomenal aspect of a phenomenal experience.

To demonstrate that Mary also gains some new “knowledge that” it is proposed that we modify Jackson's thought-experiment. In place of Mary, Marianna enters into play. The only difference between them is that Marianna is shown not a red rose, but a piece of red paper, and she is not told that it is red.

It seems obvious that Marianna acquires some new “knowledge-that” as well as some new know-how. Let us assume that she denotes her experience with the symbol  $F$  or the word *senso*. Then one can say that Marianna acquires a new concept – a phenomenal concept  $F$  (*senso*) -, or “know-how”, because she cannot, for example, form the non-indexical judgment “Everybody else I know has had  $F$  (experience *senso*) before” with the help of her theoretical concepts. In addition, when Marianna is told that what she denotes by the symbol  $F$  is the

experience of seeing red, that is, the same thing that she denoted by a theoretical concept, she gains some new “knowledge that”. This is knowledge at the level of concepts.

In the thought experiment with Mary it might look as if Mary gained some new knowledge about properties of the experience of seeing red. According to Papineau, in reality she, too, gains some knowledge at the level of concepts used for the identification of the experience.

It seems however that Papineau does not take into account the very process of the formation of a concept. For him, phenomenal concepts are concepts *sui generis*. However, conceptual dualism as well as ontological dualism contradicts to Wittgensteinian understanding of concepts as naturalized rules. (We resume the private language “argument” as follows: (1) every meaningful language obeys rules, and (2) these rules are natural, or can be naturalized.)

Papineau also applies the conceptual dualism view to give a materialistic response to the zombies argument, proposed by dualists, according to which zombies are *conceivable*, and, therefore, the properties of consciousness are non-physical, that is, materialism is false.

A materialist answer is that conceivability implies only the conceptual possibility. Zombies not possible. The illusion of their existence might appear only because there is no *a priori* relation between theoretical and phenomenal concepts. According to the *a posteriori* materialists, this relation between them is established *a posteriori*.

The Wittgensteinian position (see also Jocelyn Benoist’s Wittgensteinian contextualism (Benoist 2010/2011, 2011)) is that the genuine concepts are anchored in reality and alimented by it. And this means that the question about the conceivability of zombies, if it is a conceptual question, cannot be a purely *a priori* one. Zombies are imaginable, but it is not obvious that they are conceivable according to the appropriate natural rules, which themselves cannot be purely *a priori*.

That is why we think that, strictly speaking, conceptual dualism is false. Zombies are conceivable only if the phenomenal concepts are understood in an approximate, abstract sense, that is, if their very nature is ignored.

### 3. Phenomenal concepts and private language argument

Papineau quotes §§ 270 and 271 from *Philosophical Investigations* by Wittgenstein, which from his point of view support his thesis that Wittgenstein’s private language argument is inconsistent with phenomenal concepts.

Papineau interprets Wittgenstein in the sense that the use of the symbol S (see § 270) is meaningless until it is established (with the help of a manometer) that it is associated with a high blood pressure. He writes (Papineau 2011, pp. 181-182):

Wittgenstein is clear that, while this introduction of a public criterion might succeed in giving “S” a meaning which relates it to blood pressure, the supposed earlier connection with a sensation is of no significance. What

has happened is that the term now has a public meaning, in virtue of the new criterion, not that it always referred to a sensation. The supposed connection with a sensation is an idle part.

In reality Wittgenstein says just the opposite: “So I shall be able to say that my blood-pressure is rising without using any apparatus.” (§ 270) There is a sensation the symbol S refers to. It does not depend on whether the manometer is used or not, though its use allows one to establish the physiological nature of the sensation. So, the use of S cannot be completely meaningless; it is meaningless at the reflective/introspective level, but not at the instinctive one. The exterior criterion does not establish the meaning, but does confirm that there is a meaning.

In § 270 Wittgenstein writes: “And now it seems quite indifferent whether I have recognized the sensation *right* or not. Let us suppose I regularly identify it wrong, it does not matter in the least.” It is said here about the lack of the meaning on the reflective/introspective and only reflective/introspective level.

In § 271 Wittgenstein imagines “a person whose memory could not retain *what* the word ‘pain’ meant—so that he constantly called different things by that name”. In this case also one can say that this is not important, if the word “pain” is used in accordance with the usual symptoms and presuppositions of pain (see § 271). The person knows *instinctively* (and only instinctively) what the word “pain” means.

The exterior criterion permits one to introduce the use of the symbol S in the domain of the reflective consciousness (but this use does not amount to the first-person reflection of the instinctive experience). If earlier the person used the symbol instinctively (but not arbitrarily, not meaninglessly), within an instinctive “language game”, now she can attribute to such a use the following explicit meaning: “My blood pressure is high”.

What has been said above does not mean that the person cannot develop a properly phenomenal reflective/introspective concept (the first-person point of view) and use it to refer to her experience not instinctively, but reflectively/introspectively.

Wittgenstein’s example with a person whose memory cannot retain what the word “pain” meant presupposes that such a person is exceptional and usually we are able to retain what the word ‘pain’ means. That is, for Wittgenstein the reflective (introspective) use of the term “pain” (not only instinctive) is not meaningless.

This is corroborated by other texts of Wittgenstein. Let us take, for example, § 177:

I should like to say “I experience the because”. Not because I remember such an experience, but because when I reflect on what I experience in such a case I look at it through the medium of the concept ‘because’ (or ‘influence’ or ‘cause’ or ‘connexion’). (PI 177)

We interpret Wittgenstein’s “remember” (in German: “Nachdenken”) as reflection/introspection in the sense of *making explicit*, not in the sense of the classical *look inwards*. Papineau uses the expression *look inwards* and does not specify how he understands introspection. Nor does he refute Wittgenstein’s critiques of introspection.

For Wittgenstein a correct introspection is a look through the medium of a concept. This “look” is not Kantian. The concept does not create an epistemic gap between a thing-for-us (conceptualized) and a thing-in-itself (non-conceptualized). On the contrary, it allows us to grasp a thing and to grasp it as it is, that is, in its very reality. For instance, the concept “because” allows one to grasp the experience of using the word “because”.

One can use “because” instinctively, by analogy with the use of the symbol S in the example from § 270, but one can also use it reflectively (introspectively), as it is meant in the example from § 177.

What has been said above is applicable to the perceptual experience of seeing something red. Papineau does not deny that for Wittgenstein ordinary language can describe phenomenal experiences, and the word “red” refers to red. However, he thinks that for Wittgenstein the use of phenomenological terms, in particular, the term *senso* cannot be introspective. In disagreement with Papineau, we think that for Wittgenstein Marianna would be able to elaborate a correct reflective/introspective use of the term *senso*. This term would be meaningless only in the case of an arbitrary, not obeying any rules “inward gaze”.

Papineau justifies the possibility of a direct identification of a phenomenal experience by means of phenomenal concepts (without using any exterior criterion) with the help of Millikan’s (2000) theory of contentful judgments.

Very briefly, Millikan’s theory says that we have a “shelf-supply” of many different categories (or “ready-made concepts”) for *potential* concepts. The categories are distinguished by the kind of information we are inclined to attach to them. They allow for the identification of some objects whose concepts we do not have. For instance, having only the *animal species* ready-made concept (“category”) we might be able to use it to form the concept that is locked on to the *species* “horse”, that is, the concept of a horse.

Papineau applies this theory to phenomenal concepts and experiences. A “shelf-supply” of types of experience could permit one to identify a new kind of experience (without using any exterior criterion).

We agree with Papineau’s generalization of Millikan’s theory. However, we notice that in the cases of Mary and Marianna there is no such “shelf-supply” of phenomenal categories for potential phenomenal concepts. Both scientists have never seen any colored objects before they are shown a red rose.

Papineau opposes his approach to another one, according to which contentful judgments are constituted by rules governing such judgments. Papineau takes it that such rules require “some publicly applicable standards by which we can determine whether a subject is using the relevant terms in accord with their meaning” (Papineau 2011, p. 182).

It seems to us that Papineau/Millikan’s approach is, in reality, based on the notion of rule-following understood in the pragmatic Wittgensteinian sense: a rule can be applied in a new

situation without using any rule for its application. The role of the rule is played by the “shelf-supply” of categories for potential concepts. (For example, for Papineau “my ability to refer to horses does not involve rules of any kind.” (Papineau 2011, p. 182) In our view, this is false.)

By contrast, Papineau’s interpretation of the “rule-following” approach is not Wittgensteinian. If by “publicly applicable standards” Papineau means some pre-established standards, then they are just the rules for applying a rule, criticized by Wittgenstein (and already by Kant).

Wittgenstein’s solution to the rule-following problem amounts to his private language argument. So, phenomenal concepts are consistent with the private language argument.

#### 4. Conclusion

Papineau’s interpretation of the private language argument is restrictive. Phenomenal concepts are consistent with Wittgenstein’s argument. In particular, they are not concepts *sui generis*, but natural rules for direct identification of phenomenal experiences.

#### Literature

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