

Tye on Acquaintance and the Problem of Consciousness

TIM CRANE

Cambridge University

1. Introduction

Michael Tye's book has two main themes: (i) the rejection of the 'phenomenal concept strategy' as a solution to the problems of consciousness for physicalism, and (ii) a new proposed solution to these problems which appeals to Russell's (1910–11) distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Interweaved between these two main themes are a number of radical new claims about perceptual consciousness, including a defence of a sort of disjunctivism about perceptual content and an interesting account of the phenomena of change blindness and inattentional blindness. Tye's book shows all his usual philosophical virtues: it is bold, clear, inventive, and demonstrates his admirable willingness to scrutinise critically his earlier views.

I agree with Tye that the phenomenal concept strategy—as pursued by Balog, Block, Loar, Papineau and others—is unsuccessful. And I agree with him about this for essentially the same reason: there simply are no phenomenal concepts in the relevant sense (Tye 2009: 56; see Crane 2005). In what follows, then, I will concentrate on the second main theme: the use of the notion of acquaintance to give a materialist response to some of the common anti-materialist arguments: the Knowledge Argument, the Explanatory Gap Argument, and the challenge posed by the 'Hard Problem'. I will argue that Tye's appeal to the notion of acquaintance fails, since there is no reason to think that there is such a thing as acquaintance in Tye's sense. But it turns out that the essence of Tye's response to the Knowledge Argument (at least) does not require him to appeal to the dubious notion of acquaintance.

2. Acquaintance and Tye's Use of It

Tye introduces the notion of knowledge by acquaintance by means of a comparison with seeing. Just as we distinguish between seeing things and seeing facts (seeing that something is the case), so we can distinguish between knowing things and knowing facts (knowing that something is the case). This latter distinction Tye glosses in terms of Russell's distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Acquaintance for Tye is knowledge of things: objects, events and their properties. It is knowledge we have simply in virtue of being conscious of those things, regardless of whether we know any truths about them.

Tye rejects Russell's claim that we are acquainted with sense-data, and he also rejects Russell's 'principle of acquaintance': that 'every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted' (Russell 1912: 5). But he agrees with Russell's separation of knowledge of things from knowledge of truths: 'knowing a thing *can* occur without knowing any truth about it, simply in virtue of being acquainted with the thing' (Tye 2009: 96). Tye believes that there is a sense of 'know' in which 'one knows a thing if and only if one is acquainted with that thing' (2009: 96).

I will return to Tye's notion of acquaintance shortly. But let me first explain how he uses this notion to respond to the anti-materialist arguments. I will assume here that these arguments (the Knowledge Argument, the Explanatory Gap Argument, the Zombie Argument and the challenge posed by the 'Hard Problem') are well-known in their general outlines.

Tye's response to the Knowledge Argument is that it assumes that 'all worldly knowledge is knowledge *that*' (2009: 131). Mary's new knowledge is 'worldly' knowledge, but it is not *simply* knowledge that something is the case. This is not because, as Lewis and Nemirow have argued, Mary's knowledge is ability-knowledge; Tye (rightly) rejects their argument (2009: 125). Rather, it is because she acquires knowledge by acquaintance or 'objectual knowledge'. Knowing what it is like to see red, on Tye's current view, is a 'mixture of factual and objectual knowledge' (2009: 133). Mary is acquainted with the colour red when she sees red for the first time, and because of this she knows the proposition that *this is what it is like to experience red* (2009: 133).

Tye's response to the Explanatory Gap argument is that it too ignores the distinction between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance (2009: 143). 'The knowledge we get by acquaintance with red is *logically* independent of our knowledge of truths. It is *physically* possible for someone [...] to know all the

physical facts pertaining to the experience of red and not know red (in the relevant sense of “know”) (2009: 139). Because of this independence, we have the sense of a gap between the physical facts and the experiential phenomenon. There is a gap between the kinds of knowledge we have, but this does not imply a gap between the phenomena themselves.

The response to the ‘Hard Problem’—which Tye sees as an extension of the Explanatory Gap problem—is essentially the same. There is an epistemic gap between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, in the sense that these are logically and metaphysically different kinds of knowledge. Because of this, we may ‘have the sense that something is missing from the physicalist story’ (2009: 144). But, as the familiar line runs, the existence of such an epistemic gap—a gap between the two kinds of knowledge—does not entail that there is anything missing from the physicalist story about reality.

Tye’s response to the Zombie Argument does not rely on the distinction between acquaintance and knowledge by description. His response to this argument instead develops, in an interesting way, the familiar physicalist line that although zombies might be conceivable, they are not metaphysically possible—because what is metaphysically possible is partly determined by what our best theory of the world is (2009: 152). And according to physicalists, physicalism is our best theory of the world. Given this, the appeal to the possibility of zombies is question-begging as an argument against physicalism.

Tye’s discussion of the zombie point raises many interesting points and deserves further discussion. But I will ignore it here, since my interest is in the use of the notion of acquaintance in the defence of physicalism.

3. Is There Such a Thing as Acquaintance?

Tye repeatedly claims that we know things by acquaintance in a ‘perfectly ordinary’ sense of ‘know’ (see e.g. 2009: 95, 98, 131). The claim requires closer examination.

It is, of course, quite true that we talk about knowing people and places, and we sometimes might use the (somewhat old-fashioned) word ‘acquaintance’ to describe this. Michael Tye himself is an acquaintance of mine; and like him, I am acquainted with the city of Athens. In other words, I know Michael Tye and Athens. Tye is surely right that this knowledge is pervasive, unexceptional, and very different from the knowledge that (e.g.) Michael Tye has run a marathon, or that Athens was the home of the 2004 Olympics.

But this ‘perfectly ordinary’ kind of knowledge is not acquaintance in Tye’s sense. There are three important differences, which are enough

to undermine Tye's appeal here to an ordinary sense of 'knowledge' and 'know'.

First, on Tye's notion of acquaintance 'one can be acquainted with a thing (in [this] sense, following Russell) without knowing any truths about it' (2009: 101). If ordinary knowledge of things were like this, then it would make sense for me to say that I could know Michael Tye even if I have *no idea* who he is, or even what kind of *thing* he is! Tye admits that his notion is in tension with the ordinary concept here: 'there is a familiar sense of "know" under which I would not count as knowing [someone] if I did not know *any* truths about him'. But nonetheless he also wants to insist that 'knowing a thing *can* occur without knowing any truths about it simply in virtue of being acquainted with it' (2009: 96). Acquaintance does not entail that one knows any truths about that thing. But this is not so with the ordinary concept of knowing a thing.

Second, knowing things in the ordinary sense admits of degrees. I know Michael Tye fairly well, but not as well as some other people do. Although I have been to Athens a few times, I do not know it as well as Tye does. This contrasts with propositional knowledge, which (on most conceptions) does not admit of degrees. But this is also a respect in which knowing things differs from Tye's notion of acquaintance. 'Knowledge of a particular shade of brown via direct awareness of it' Tye writes, 'is knowledge of a sort that cannot *itself* be improved or deepened by knowing truths about that shade of brown'. In this respect, he concludes 'knowledge by acquaintance of the colour is complete and perfect' (2009: 97). But my knowledge of Athens can always be improved by knowledge of truths—about how to get to Kolonaki from the Parthenon by foot, for example. So knowing Athens cannot be a case of acquaintance in Tye's sense.

Third, knowledge of things in the ordinary sense is a persisting or standing mental state, as opposed to something episodic or event-like. Knowing Tye the man, or Athens the city, is not something which disappears when asleep or when one is not thinking of these things. I've known Tye and Athens for many years, and if all goes well I will continue to know them when I wake up tomorrow. In this sense, knowing things is more like propositional knowledge than it is like, say, visual perception. But Tye's notion of acquaintance seems like something more episodic: it occurs when, and only when, one is conscious of the object of knowledge. 'In being conscious of a particular shade of red at a particular moment' he writes, 'I know that shade of red'. But 'I may not know that shade of red a few moments later after turning away' (2009: 98). Why would one not know the shade when one turns away? The obvious answer suggested by Tye's remarks is

that knowledge by acquaintance can be restricted to the moment in which one is conscious of it. This, I think, marks the third major difference between knowing things in the ordinary sense and Tye's knowledge by acquaintance.

I am not especially concerned to identify the essential marks of 'the' ordinary concept of knowing things. Obviously, there are many different concepts in this area, and room for debate about what the ordinary language meaning of words like 'knowledge' is. But I hope it is clear that the phenomenon I have identified as 'knowing things' is very different from Tye's knowledge by acquaintance. Knowing things—in the sense in which I know Tye the man and Athens the city—is something that requires knowledge of some truths, it admits of degrees, and it is a persisting mental state, not an event in the stream of consciousness. Tye's acquaintance does not require knowledge of truths at all, it need not admit of degrees, and it is event-like. So Tye's acquaintance is not knowledge in ordinary sense.

However, this does not mean that acquaintance in Tye's sense does not exist. It just means that Tye is not entitled to appeal to the ordinary notion of knowing in his defence of acquaintance; his notion of acquaintance must be a technical notion. Nothing wrong with that, of course. But the next question is: why think this technical notion corresponds to anything in our cognitive lives?

Russell's notion of acquaintance was a technical notion too. The idea that there is one kind of experiential relation in which we stand to sense-data, universals and (possibly) ourselves is part of Russell's complex epistemology and metaphysics from the first few decades of the early 20th century, and is very much shaped by the pre-occupations of that era. We have already seen that Russell's view is somewhat different from Tye's. Apart from the differences Tye himself notes, Russell also seems to think of acquaintance as something more like a persisting state: 'it is natural to say that I am acquainted with an object even at moments when it is not actually before my mind, provided it has been before my mind, and will be again whenever occasion arises' (Russell 1910–11: 109). So Tye cannot simply rely on the idea that Russell has established that there is such a thing as acquaintance. Russell has not established this, and his notion of acquaintance is different from Tye's.

So if we cannot appeal to the ordinary notion, or to Russell, why believe that there is such a thing as acquaintance in Tye's technical sense? Why think that there is a special kind of 'objectual knowledge' which we only get by being conscious? Tye offers a number of answers, none of which is persuasive.

He begins by saying that consciousness is 'undeniably epistemically enabling' (2009: 98). In other words, when I am conscious of

something, I'm put in a position to know facts about it. Tye is right that this is undeniable; but he is also aware that this goes nowhere to show that we need a technical notion of acquaintance. This point could be granted by someone who thinks that there is conscious experience, and that conscious experience can make propositional knowledge possible.

Tye then moves to what he calls 'a more direct answer':

it is simply incoherent to suppose that one might be genuinely (non-inferentially) conscious of an entity and yet not know it *at all*. In being conscious of a particular shade of red at a particular moment, say, I know that shade of red. How could I not? I know it just by being conscious of it. I may not know that shade of red a few moments later, after turning away; I may not know any truths about that shade of red; but as I view the shade, know it I do in some ordinary basic sense of the term 'know'. (2009: 98)

I have already disputed whether Tye is right to call this an 'ordinary' sense of 'know', so I will ignore this point here. What I want to examine instead is the idea that when I am conscious of a shade of red, I know it.

What does it mean, to know a shade of red? It might mean: to know which shade it is; or to know that it is called 'vermillion', for example; or know simply that it is a shade or red. But Tye clearly does not mean these things, since they are examples of knowledge of truths. Nor does it mean that one can recognise it, for this means being able to identify it when seen again, and Tye rules this out by saying that I may not know the shade a moment later. So what is this knowledge?

There is something to be said for Tye's claim that it is incoherent to suppose that one might be conscious of something and not know it at all (so long as we restrict ourselves, as Tye reasonably does, to the consciousness of creatures capable of thought and propositional attitudes). Even in cases where one might be tempted to say that one has no idea what it is that one is conscious of, one can always classify the object of consciousness in some way—as a sound, a shape, a colour etc. But this does not support Tye's claim, because these classifications are—or result in—just more propositional knowledge. To insist that 'I know it just by being conscious of it' is, in this context, question-begging. The whole question is whether there *is* a special kind of non-propositional knowing which derives simply from being conscious. Tye has not provided an independent reason that there is.

I am sceptical, then, that there is any such thing as acquaintance as Tye construes it, and so sceptical too that there is any such thing as knowledge by acquaintance. There is conscious experience of the world, e.g., in vision. There is propositional knowledge. And there is everyday

knowledge of things. But none of these amount to acquaintance in Tye's technical sense.

However, it turns out that Tye does not need to appeal to acquaintance in his technical sense in order to give the kind of solution to the Knowledge Argument he offers. I don't think he needs it for his solution to the other puzzles too, but I will concentrate here on the Knowledge Argument.

4. The Knowledge Argument

Tye says that the Knowledge Argument relies on the assumption that 'all worldly knowledge is knowledge *that*' (2009: 131). In fact, this is not the case: a defender of the argument can easily agree that we can know objects, in the ordinary sense described above. Rather, what the argument relies on is that *some* of the worldly knowledge Mary gains is knowledge *that*—for the argument aims to show (at the very least) that she knew a truth that she did not know in the black-and-white room. It is consistent with this conclusion that Mary comes to have new knowledge of objects when she leaves the room, just as it is consistent with this conclusion that Mary comes to have know-how that she did not have before.

Tye agrees that Mary learns a new truth, so he agrees with this part of the conclusion of the argument. He thinks that Mary learns the truth that *this is what it is like to experience red* (2009: 133). She did not know this truth before, according to Tye, because she was not acquainted with the colour red. When she is acquainted with the colour red, she is then in a position to know this proposition. However, we have found Tye's notion of acquaintance hard to pin down.

Fortunately, he does not need it. For the same point can be made using a psychological concept which really is 'perfectly ordinary': seeing (or visually experiencing, it doesn't matter which). It is part of the story that Mary sees red for the first time when she leaves the room. It is also independently plausible that seeing is a way of getting knowledge (as Tye says, consciousness is 'epistemically enabling': 2009: 98). Putting these two ideas together, we can say that it is because she sees red for the first time that she now knows that *this is what it is like to experience red*. This knowledge is propositional, as Tye says, but it is based on a mental state which is non-propositional, namely seeing red. This account of Mary's situation is very similar to Tye's, except that the obscure notion of acquaintance is replaced with the perfectly familiar notion of seeing.

This account would solve the puzzle if we accept the principle that there are some truths that you cannot know unless you have had

certain experiences. So Mary can only know that *this is what it is like to experience red* after she has experienced red. She could not know this in the black-and-white room: not because it is a truth about some mysterious non-physical feature of the world, but because it is the kind of truth that requires the knower to have an experience. I think this ‘empiricist’ principle is plausible (see Crane 2003), though it has been challenged (see e.g. Dennett 2007). Certainly, more would have to be said to defend it than I can say here. But for present purposes, it is enough to point out that the principle is perfectly compatible with physicalism and with the main lines of thought in *Consciousness Revisited*.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that taking this line on the knowledge argument is not a way of re-introducing the phenomenal concept strategy which Tye rightly rejects. The concepts which Mary employs when she comes to know that *this is what it is like to experience red* are perfectly ordinary concepts (*this*, *experience*, *red* etc.) which she possessed in the black and white room. No ‘phenomenal concepts’ are required.

5. Conclusion

In the preface to his book Tye says that when he first read *The Problems of Philosophy* he ‘could not make head or tails’ of Russell’s idea of knowledge by acquaintance, but that now he realises it is the key to understanding the puzzles of consciousness (2009: xii). If I am right in what I say here, Tye’s initial reaction was the correct one. There is irreducible ‘objectual knowledge’, to be sure. But neither Russell’s nor Tye’s attempts to account for it in terms of theoretical notions of ‘acquaintance’ are at all plausible, or even fully intelligible.

I have argued that Tye is also wrong in thinking that such a notion is needed to give a physicalist response to the Knowledge Argument. The essence of Tye’s response can be preserved without appealing to acquaintance, but simply by appealing to aspects of the relationship between seeing and knowing. Indeed, most of the theses advanced in *Consciousness Revisited* can survive the excision of the dubious notion of acquaintance.

References

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