

# **RESPONSE TO DARRAGH BYRNE'S "DO PHENOMENAL CONCEPTS MISREPRESENT?"**

## **Abstract**

I begin by summarizing my view of the progression that occurred from 1950s to 1990s physicalism, and in terms of this, present an overview of the reconciliation I was attempting in 'Conceptualizing Physical Consciousness'. I then address Byrne's two main arguments. In the case of the first, I show that his argument turns on a third-person conception of appearance which is not the one addressed in the debates in question, and argue that functionalism is not relevant to physicalism about consciousness in the manner Byrne thinks. In the case of the second, I argue that Byrne's attempt to prise metaphysics apart from science shows a misunderstanding of the physicalist agenda. In conclusion I indicate how my views have moved on. My misrepresentation thesis, like any form of conventional physicalism, cannot ultimately avoid eliminativism; and this I reject.

Phenomenal properties are conceived in direct opposition to physical properties, namely as subjective properties typically caused by physical properties. Thus phenomenal-green, for instance, is subjective in that unlike physical properties, it exists only from the perspective of the person experiencing it; and to get a grasp on the notion of it requires us to contrast the greenness a leaf may possess, with the experiential greenness the leaf causes within us. The 1950s physicalists thought, like me, that such properties cannot be physical. So not wanting to eliminate conscious experiences, they denied that we conceive them phenomenally. They argued that the concept of a green experience is the concept of an event which plays a certain functional role in your life; essentially that of happening when you look at green objects. As Place (1956: 49) put it, ‘we are not saying that there is something, the after-image, which is green’; rather we are saying that an event is taking within our own bodies (empirically hypothesised to be a brain event) which we recognise from its functional role.

This tactic was implausible, because we obviously do conceive conscious experiences phenomenally. We conceive the conscious experience caused by the leaf as subjective and possessed of a greenness leaves cannot possess; not simply as an anodyne happening which is metaphysically neutral because we have no idea what it is. As such, 1950s physicalism was immediately mired in controversy, and all that opponents like Nagel, Kripke and Jackson needed to do, was issue reminders about what our conception of consciousness amounts to. They won the argument, because the next generation of physicalists, led by Brian Loar, gave up on eradicating phenomenal properties, and instead tried to incorporate them into physicalism. The result was bound to be incoherent, because you cannot retain a conception formed in direct opposition to physical properties, while arguing that this conception is just as innocuous as the 1950s physicalists’ ‘something going on’; which is exactly what this proposal amounts to.

In my paper, I attempted to reconcile 1950s and 1990s physicalism, by arguing that we can accept that we conceive conscious experiences phenomenally, while also accepting that phenomenal properties have no place within physical reality. This is achieved with a misrepresentation thesis, according to which phenomenal concepts are a component of how we conceive experiences, which misrepresent them by ascribing phenomenal properties; but that another component is the functional one of the 1950s physicalists, which secures reference to experiences / brain states.

Byrne defends 1990s physicalism against me; he thinks conceiving a brain state as a phenomenally green appearance may be a perfectly accurate way of conceiving of what that brain state is. He begins his critique by saying that my position is ambiguous between a revisionist and eliminativist agenda. For how could a phenomenal concept misrepresent, in line with revisionism, when such concepts are exhausted by their referents? By endnote 7, however, Byrne has everything in place to explain my position, which is that the phenomenal component of our conceptions of conscious states ascribe to them phenomenal properties, but since there are no such properties, this component misrepresents; this aspect of the position is eliminative. On recognising this misrepresentation, then, we revise our conception of conscious states; this aspect is revisionist.

Byrne's main line of argument begins in an acceptance of the conclusion of my own main argument, namely that if the 1990s physicalists are right that phenomenal concepts refer directly to brain states, then the metaphysical essence of brain states must be to exist as introspective appearances. I was pleasantly surprised by this, since I had thought that if I got this far, I was already home. Byrne, however, thinks I subsequently go wrong (with what I

took to be the easy bit), by drawing the further conclusion that 1990s physicalism is thereby refuted. He has two arguments.

The first is that if we switch from an identity theory to functionalism, it is not implausible that brain functions might be essentially introspective appearances. As he puts it,

Appearances are, I suggest, relations of a certain kind between agents and the subject-matters of their perceptions (or here, introspections) and while it is very difficult intuitively to understand how vibrating cellular threads could amount to relations, the idea that functional properties (albeit with categorical physical realizers) could be perceptual relations is easier to countenance.

So to explain what a functional property is, Byrne thinks a scientist might well mention its introspective appearance, given that this is itself relational.

However Byrne's notion of appearance is of a third-person relation between the agent and the subject-matter, whereas phenomenal appearance is the agent's conception of what appears to them: as subjective and green, for instance. Byrne's appearances admit of an appearance / reality distinction, but phenomenal appearances do not. It is the latter which 1990s physicalism is trying to deal with; and claiming that they are functional does not help, because functional properties are just as objective as physical ones. It makes matter worse, in fact, because phenomenal appearances are conceived as concrete presences, but functions are abstract. This just adds an extra layer of ontological incompatibility: not only is something apparently subjective supposed to be really objective, but something apparently concrete is supposed to be really abstract.

The idea that functionalism is a more palatable alternative to the identity theory is a longstanding confusion. We have the intuition that a large-scale property, such as economic inflation, can supervene on different physical states, because we think that talking about inflation is a highly abstract way of talking about the physical world, thus rendering inflation irreducible. Talk of consciousness, however, seems neither an abstract nor concrete way of talking about the physical world; we cannot imagine why *any* particular physical state would realize it, though physicalists suppose that *some* state must. Philosophers who think non-reductivism is relevant to consciousness, then, confuse two different reasons multiple realizability intuitions can occur.

Byrne's second argument is that physicalists need not insist that a scientific explanation of what something is must mention all its essential properties; so it need not mention that brain states are essentially subjective appearances. His reasoning turns on distinguishing science from metaphysics. Thus a metaphysician might claim that the essence of an animal is its biological origin, but a scientist would not have to mention biological origins to say what that physical object essentially is.

The surface problem with this argument is that Byrne is invoking a property distinction between the object *qua* animal, and the object *qua* object; a distinction which 1990s physicalism explicitly disavows. The former invokes historical properties which are not needed to give a metaphysical description of what the thing essentially is, according to physicalists. If that animal suddenly appeared without a history, it would still be the same physical thing, but not (arguably) the same animal. But if a brain state suddenly appeared, it

would have to be an introspective appearance, if concepts of the latter pick out nothing but the former. So in specifying its physical essence, appearance would have to be mentioned.

The deeper problem is that I do not think Byrne has fully grasped what physicalism amounts to. Physicalism is an attempt to make metaphysics respectable, by freeing it from the need to specify a priori the nature of the physical world – which in the age of modern science is no longer credible – and instead leave it to scientists to empirically determine the nature of fundamental reality. This merging of metaphysics with science is the reason physicalism is the only metaphysical position with “contemporary ‘clout’” (Putnam 1983: 208). Byrne criticises me for not bringing historicist considerations to bear on physical concepts – for being ‘recklessly ahistoricist’ – but historicism is already built into physicalism. Metaphysics cannot be prised apart from science within physicalism, for the whole idea is that contemporary physics provides our best picture of the metaphysical essence of what exists. And since physics has nothing to say about introspective appearance, the result that appearance is essential to certain physical things would refute it.

My paper was an attempt to see whether physicalism could be true, by formulating the strongest version possible. I do not think it can be, however. For my version does not avoid the basic difficulty that physicalism must deny consciousness as ordinarily conceived; and I no longer think this conception can be attributed to Cartesian philosophy. That means it cannot preserve our ordinary take on our situation, but must reconceive it as one in which we are physical objects uttering false sentences about having a subjective, inside view on things. All forms of (non-revisionary; cf. Strawson 2008) physicalism lead to eliminativism, and its best defenders are the ones, like Rorty and Dennett, who know this. But eliminativism is crazy (Tartaglia 2016a). With historical circumspection, however, I think we can see through

the pressures which led us down this path, and reject physicalism with a good conscience (Tartaglia 2016b). For this, it is important to clearly demarcate philosophy from science; as Byrne says we should.

Word Count: 1500

## References

- Place, U.T. (1956) 'Is Consciousness a Brain Process?', *British Journal of Psychology*, 47: 44-50.
- Putnam, H. (1983) *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers Volume 3*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strawson, G. (2008) *Real Materialism and other essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tartaglia, J. (2016a) 'Rorty's Philosophy of Consciousness', in A. Malachowski (ed.) *A Companion to Rorty*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Tartaglia, J. (2016b) *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*, London: Bloomsbury.