

Materialism and the subjectivity of experience

Suppose we accept some kind of materialism: every real entity is material and has objective existence. Now, in order to get empirical data about an object, some causal relation must hold between the object and the data. But what if the “object” we are interested in is the phenomenal aspect of conscious mental states? *Prima facie*, this “object” is not a material entity; it has no objective reality; hence it cannot be a link in a causal chain.

Such considerations have motivated some philosophers either (1) to deny the existence of *qualia*; or (2) to claim that qualia are real only insofar as they can be reduced to brain states. These positions, “eliminativist” and “reductionist” respectively, draw a distinction between “objective” and “subjective” phenomena, where the former are public while the latter are only accessible from a 1st person point of view. According to (1) since qualia are –by definition– only accessible subjectively, they do not count as “real”. Following (2), if qualia are real, they are *identical* with physical states that can be described in objective terms. In any case, metaphysical materialism is adopted, and this stance is considered to be incompatible with the reality of phenomena only available from a 1st person point of view.

I argue that the acceptance of the reality of subjective phenomena is not at odds with metaphysical monism. The distinction between “objective” and “subjective” phenomena is an *epistemological* one, which does not *entail* any form of dualist metaphysics. This distinction arises from the fact that knowledge is constructed by subjects of experience who always occupy a particular point of view.

Concerning a given experience, we can focus –as epistemological subjects– on the observed object (e.g. the cherry I see), or on the phenomenal way the object is presented (e.g. the red *quale* in my perception of the cherry). And clearly both the object and its phenomenal presentation are involved in a *single* epistemological process. Moreover, it is through –subjective– experience that we gain knowledge about an objective world, which in turn includes the subjects *with their experiences*. Therefore, the acceptance of the existence of “subjective” and “objective” phenomena, does not threaten metaphysical monism.

But one might raise the following objection against this line of reasoning: Certainly, knowledge is acquired through epistemological processes that involve subjective experiences of cognitive agents. But in a materialistic framework, the cognitive links involved in the causal chains that relate objects of knowledge with the empirical data, must be *brain* processes. If one claims that subjective experiences have a sort of “reality” which is not reducible to –and not identical with– objective brain processes, one is committed to a form of metaphysical dualism: subjective experience is non-material.

However, notice that the subjective character of qualitative properties of mental states is an *epistemological* condition. From the *ontological* point of view, phenomenal qualities could be some sort of strongly emergent properties. These are properties that emerge in a lawful manner from brain states, but are qualitatively different from the properties of the basis of reduction (Kistler, forthcoming). Now, emergent properties are real and can play causal roles; and the special relation a subject has with his own cognitive processes (Flanagan 1992) would explain the *epistemological* subjectivity of phenomenal experiences.

Neither epistemology nor metaphysics is *prior* to the other (Quine 1969). For instance, the belief in the priority of epistemology gave rise in modern philosophy to idealism. And nowadays the priority given to what I consider to be narrow physicalistic metaphysics prevents from the outset the inclusion of subjective experiences -the very source of our objective knowledge- into the real world.