

Cartesian Intuitions

Their Role in Contemporary Philosophy of Mind

Pascal.ludwig@me.com

Philosophy of Mind & Cognitive Science

The Cartesian Legacy

Descartes bequeathed to philosophy a set of powerful intuitions that continue to shape debates about consciousness and the mind-body problem.

Three central intuitions:

- (i) The epistemic asymmetry - we have privileged access to our own mental states
- (ii) The conceivability intuition - what is conceivable is possible
- (iii) The qualia intuition - subjective qualities exist in the mind, not in the world

This lecture examines these intuitions and asks whether they are as obvious as they seem.

Self-knowledge is special

- Every empirical proposition is doubtful;
- Propositions about myself are doubtful when they are formulated in the third-person:
 - « Pascal Ludwig is born in Montpellier », « PL has three daughters »
 - Even when they are psychological: « PL is thinking now », « PL is doubting now »

- Some propositions about myself are doubtful even when formulated in the first-person, when they aren't psychological:
 - « I have blue eyes », « I have a body », « I was born in Montpellier »
- **Psychological propositions formulated in the first person, on the other hand, seem to be certain:**
 - « I am doubting now that my right hand exist »
- **Self-ascriptions of psychological properties are certain when, and only when, they are derived from conscious mental states.**

Specificity of self-knowledge, continued

- The self-knowledge discovered by Descartes in the Cogito has the following characteristics:
 - it is *immediate* rather than inferential; introspection yields a kind of *immediate justification, like perception*.
 - it is *first-personal*
 - it is very *secure*, more than perception according to Descartes.
 - For instance, when I am looking at a tower, I can doubt that there is a tower in front of me, not that it seems that there is a tower in front of me.
 - The security of self-knowledge makes it *more fundamental* than the knowledge of the external world.

The Conceivability Intuition

From Descartes to Chalmers

Descartes's Real Distinction

'I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and... a clear and distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing.'

- Meditations VI (AT VII 78)

The argument structure:

1. I can clearly and distinctly conceive of mind existing without body.
2. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive is possible (God guarantees this).
3. Therefore, it is possible for mind to exist without body.
4. Therefore, mind and body are really distinct substances.

The Conceivability-Possibility Link

The core principle:

If P is conceivable, then P is (metaphysically) possible.

Why believe this?

Descartes: God is no deceiver; clear and distinct ideas track reality

Contemporary: Our best guide to modal truth is conceivability

The challenge:

Some things seem conceivable but are impossible:

Water not being H₂O? (seems conceivable, but water is necessarily H₂O)

Hesperus not being Phosphorus? (conceivable, but they are necessarily identical)

Chalmers's Zombie Argument

A philosophical zombie is a being that is:

Physically identical to a conscious human

Functionally identical (same behavior, same dispositions)

But has no phenomenal consciousness - 'nothing it is like' to be it

The argument (Chalmers 1996):

1. Zombies are conceivable.
2. If zombies are conceivable, they are metaphysically possible.
3. If zombies are possible, physicalism is false.
4. Therefore, physicalism is false.

Challenges to the Zombie Argument

Deny premise (1):

Zombies are not really conceivable - we only think we can conceive them.

(Dennett: the 'Zombic hunch' is an illusion)

Deny premise (2):

Conceivability does not entail possibility - the link fails for a posteriori necessities.

(Type-B physicalism)

The deeper question:

Is the conceivability intuition a reliable guide to metaphysical truth, or is it merely a reflection of our cognitive limitations?

The Qualia Intuition

Subjective qualities and the world

Qualia: In the Mind, Not the World

The Cartesian picture:

The physical world contains only 'primary qualities' - extension, motion, number

'Secondary qualities' (colors, sounds, tastes) exist only in the mind

What we experience is not the world itself, but ideas caused by the world

This view was developed by Locke, refined by modern philosophy of mind:

Qualia = the intrinsic, ineffable, private, directly apprehensible properties of conscious experience

Example: The redness you experience when you see a tomato is not 'out there' in the tomato - it is a property of your experience.

The Inverted Spectrum

The thought experiment:

Imagine that your color experiences are systematically inverted relative to mine. When you see what I call 'red,' you have the experience I have when I see 'green' - and vice versa. Yet we both use the word 'red' for ripe tomatoes.

If this is possible, then:

Qualia are not reducible to functional roles

There is something about experience that outruns physical/functional description

Functionalism cannot be the whole story about the mind

But is spectrum inversion genuinely conceivable? This is contested.

Jackson's Knowledge Argument

What Mary didn't know

Mary's Room

'Mary is a brilliant scientist who... has been confined from birth to a black-and-white room... She learns everything there is to know about the physical nature of the world. She knows all the physical facts... What will happen when Mary is released from her black-and-white room?'

- Frank Jackson, 'Epiphenomenal Qualia' (1982)

Jackson's claim:

When Mary sees red for the first time, she learns something new - what it is like to see red. But she already knew all the physical facts. Therefore, there are non-physical facts about consciousness.

The Knowledge Argument

The argument:

1. Before release, Mary knows all the physical facts about color vision.
2. After release, Mary learns something new (what it's like to see red).
3. Therefore, there are facts about color experience that are not physical facts.
4. Therefore, physicalism is false.

Major responses:

Ability hypothesis (Lewis, Nemirow): Mary gains a new ability (to recognize, imagine red), not new propositional knowledge

Acquaintance hypothesis: Mary gains acquaintance with an old fact, not knowledge of a new fact

Deny premise 1: Mary didn't really know all physical facts (she couldn't represent them phenomenally)

PART IV

Are These Intuitions Universal?

Lewis's challenge to the qualia concept

Should a Materialist Believe in Qualia?

David Lewis (1995) argues:

The concept of 'qualia' as used by anti-physicalists is not part of folk psychology. It is a philosophers' invention, designed to cause trouble for materialism.

Lewis distinguishes two senses of 'qualia':

Qualia as qualities of experience (the folk notion) - compatible with materialism

Qualia as intrinsic, ineffable, non-physical properties - a philosopher's fiction

The deeper point:

The Cartesian intuitions that drive dualist arguments are not obvious deliverances of common sense. They are theory-laden intuitions, shaped by a philosophical tradition. Materialists are free to reject them.

Conclusion

The Cartesian intuitions - conceivability, qualia, epistemic privilege - have been extraordinarily influential in philosophy of mind.

But they are not beyond dispute:

The conceivability-possibility link is questioned by cases of a posteriori necessity

The existence of qualia (in the strong sense) is denied by eliminativists and some functionalists

The intuitions themselves may be artifacts of philosophical theorizing, not folk psychology

Discussion questions:

Are there pre-theoretical intuitions about consciousness that don't depend on Descartes? Can we make progress on the mind-body problem without relying on intuitions?