Lewis “On What Experience Teaches”

Peter Bradley

55.0 The main point:

Lewis is arguing that there is no such thing as ‘phenomenal information’ in the sense of ‘Mary knows that’, but rather, there is only ‘know-how’. In short, that what Mary does not know is how to remember, recognize, and imaginatively reconstruct what it is like to see red.

Lewis has a detailed discussion of “Three ways to miss the point.” We covered most of these in class, but here they are in brief:

1. to read ‘knowing what it is like’ as ‘knowing what it resembles’. This misses the point, as Mary could know, on the basis of experiments with live subjects that a red rose is usually grouped with fire trucks, blood, and the like.

2. to read ‘knowing what it is like’ as ‘knowing what experiences on has’. But then Mary could know what it is like because she could be told that people have experiences of red.

3. to read ‘knowing what it is like’ as ‘knowing that I am seeing red now’. There are two different facts that need to be distinguished: 1st. Mary does learn that she is seeing red now when she sees red, but she will continue to know what it is like to see red after she no longer knows ‘I am seeing red now’.

56.0 Experience as the best teacher

There is a change that takes place in a subject when that subject has an experience, and thereby comes to know what it is like.

The hypothesis of phenomenal information is that no amount of physical information can help to learn what it is like: that there is some different kind of information out there that can be known: phenomenal information. This phenomenal information can only be known through experience: previously open possibilities are eliminated.

If the Hypothesis of phenomenal information is true (HYP), then the phenomenal information is about some aspect of our experience.

If HYP is false, then there is still experience an yet no information about experience is phenomenal information. (HYP does not claim that experience depends on phenomenology. HYP is a statement about the information about experience.)

So, the Knowledge argument is an attempt (from Jackson) to show that if we accept HYP, we will be committed to rejecting Materialism. Therefore, in order to hold onto Materialism, we must, according to Lewis, reject HYP. (Note: the others on the flow-chart: Tye, Jackson (current), Lycan, Loar and van Gulick all disagree with this claim: then hold onto HYP and Materialism.)

Three more ways to miss the point:
HYP is a thesis about the elimination of possibilities - but there are other ways to characterize information. Might we use one of these ways to discover why we are attracted to HYP, while it is actually false. That is, can we ‘Quine’ Phenomenal information?

No. Each of these ways of characterizing information can be used to say that lessons in Russian give us new information. And that is crazy - learning Russian lets us think about the same things in new ways, but it is impossible that there be some information about the world that can only be understood in Russian.

4th: If a camera takes a photograph of a room, the film bears traces of what went on in that room. The traces bear information about what went on in that room. The traces suffice to eliminate information, so when we say “information”, we just mean “distinctive traces.” But, lessons in Russian lay down “distinctive traces”, and in that sense eliminate information.

5th: When we transmit information, we often transmit text. Thus, having information is akin to storing text. Thus, if there is a language of thought, perhaps there is some way in which that language could gain new words, and that is what Mary does. But, lessons in Russian adds new words to the language of thought, as the language of thought can ‘borrow’ words from the public language.

6th: Think of ‘possibilities’ as maximally consistent (contains all sentences and no contradictions) sets of sentences. When someone gains new information, i.e a new sentence, it changes these sets, as they certain sentences may now be ruled out, others it, etc. But the same is true of Russian, and moreover, we are not at all sure if these possibilities Mary eliminates were ever, themselves, genuine.

56.1 Curiouser and Curiouser:

Another attack: HYP is not just opposed to materialism. It looks like the knowledge argument could be used to argue against parapsychology - (recall that Jackson dismisses this is a previous paper).

56.2 Phenomenal to Epiphenomenal

Once again, the phenomenal information would have no effect on the motions / actions of Mary if it is not physical.

56.3 The Ability Hypothesis

When one has an experience, one gains the abilities to remember and imagine. You also gain the ability to recognize. These abilities cannot be gained except through experience. Therefore, the Ability Hypothesis says that: “knowing what an experience is like just is the possession of these abilities to remember, imagine, and recognize” (p. 593)

And if the ability hypothesis is correct, there is no phenomenal information (or in other words, HYP is false.)