

Physicalism and Phenomenal Concepts*

Daniel Stoljar
Australian National University

Address for Correspondence:
Philosophy Program, RSSH
Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Australia
dstoljar@coombs.anu.edu.au

Abstract.

A phenomenal concept is the concept of a particular type of sensory or perceptual experience, where the notion of experience is understood phenomenologically. A recent and increasingly influential idea in philosophy of mind suggests that reflection on these concepts will play a major role in the debate about conscious experience, and in particular in the defense of physicalism, the thesis that psychological truths supervene on physical truths. According to this idea—I call it *the phenomenal concept strategy*—phenomenal concepts are importantly different from other concepts, and arguments against physicalism fatally neglect to take this difference into account. This paper divides the phenomenal concept strategy into a number of different versions, and argues that no version of the strategy is successful. The paper ends by contrasting the phenomenal concept strategy with a rival strategy—I call it *the missing concept strategy*. I suggest that the missing concept strategy presents a more plausible response to the issues about physicalism and experience.

1. The Phenomenal Concept Strategy

A phenomenal concept is the concept of a specific type of perceptual or sensory experience where the notion of experience is understood phenomenologically.¹ So, for example, the phenomenal concept RED SENSATION is the concept of the specific type of

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¹For my purposes, to understand experience phenomenologically is to endorse to the following account of the identity conditions for experiences: an experience-type *e* is identical to experience-type *e** iff what it is like to undergo experience *e* is identical to what it is like to undergo experience *e**. There are certainly other possibilities here, but will not be pursue them. Nor will I pursue questions of a metaphysical nature about events, types etc that some view as relevant to the issues.

sensation one gets from looking at red things such as British pillar-boxes or the Chinese flag. The concept RED SENSATION is not then the concept RED, for that concept typically qualifies objects not sensations. Nor is it the concept SENSATION THAT REPRESENTS THINGS AS RED, for there is no contradiction in the idea of a red sensation that did not represent things that way. Nor even is it the concept THE SENSATION ONE GETS FROM LOOKING AT RED THINGS, for that sensation might not have been a red sensation.²

Many philosophers have suggested in different ways that reflection on phenomenal concepts will play a major role in philosophy of mind, and in particular in the defense of physicalism, the doctrine that psychological truths supervene on physical truths. According to this strategy for the defense of physicalism—I will call it *the phenomenal concept strategy*—phenomenal concepts are importantly different from other concepts, and arguments against physicalism, in particular the conceivability argument and the knowledge argument, fatally neglect to take this difference into account. Michael Tye (1999), for example, writes that the problems in philosophy of mind derive “largely from a failure to recognize the special features of phenomenal concepts” (p. 707). Similarly, Christopher Hill and Brian McLaughlin (1999, p. 447) write that “because of certain facts about...sensory [i.e. phenomenal] and physical concepts” the arguments can be answered. And, in the paper to which much of the literature on the strategy traces its source, Brian Loar (1997) suggests that once we recognize these special features of phenomenal concepts we can “take the phenomenological intuition at face value, accepting introspective [i.e. phenomenal] concepts and their conceptual irreducibility, and at the same time take phenomenal qualities to be identical with physical-functional properties of the sort envisaged by contemporary brain science” (p.598).³

What, according to the phenomenal concept strategy, *is* the difference between phenomenal and other concepts? Different versions of the strategy proceed differently, and part of our project in what follows will be to separate out these different versions. But, according to one central version, and the version I will mainly concentrate on, the difference emerges when one considers what it is to *possess* phenomenal as opposed to non-phenomenal concepts—that is, when one considers issues of concept possession.⁴ David Papineau, who defends a version of the phenomenal concept strategy, says that somebody “who has never seen anything red cannot deploy a phenomenal concept of red visual experience” (1999, p.5). And Tye (1999) writes that “Grasping the phenomenal

² The phrase ‘red sensation’ should not be interpreted as ‘sensation that is red’, rather ‘red’ is being used to mark a specific sort of sensation typically occasioned by red things. There are obviously a host of issues surround the correct interpretation of not only of phenomenal concepts but of concepts quite generally, but I will try to set such issues aside in this paper. For a recent comprehensive discussion of concepts, see Fodor 1998, and for some recent discussion of phenomenal concepts, see Nida-Rümelin 1995, Loar 1997, Tye 1999, and Chalmers 2000.

³Loar’s paper was originally published in a slightly different form in 1990.

⁴In addition to the writers mentioned in the text, versions of the phenomenal concept strategy or else close cousins of the strategy, can be found in Block and Stalnaker 1999, Byrne 1999, Harman 1990, Hill 1997, Hill and McLaughlin 1999, Levine 2001, Perry 2001, and Sturgeon 1994, 2001

concept PAIN...requires more than having a first person perspective on oneself...the relevant perspective or point of view is that conferred upon one by one's undergoing an experience of pain. Each phenomenal concept is thus tied to a particular experience-specific perspective occupied by the possessor of the concept. As the experiences vary, so too do the phenomenal concepts" (p.709).

Later we will see that there are different ways to take these remarks. But at least for initial expository purposes, it is reasonable to see them as expressing a view concerning phenomenal concept possession I will call *the experience thesis*:⁵

Experience Thesis: *S* possesses the (phenomenal) concept *C* of experience *E* only if *S* has actually had experience *E*.

According to the experience thesis, I have the phenomenal concept RED SENSATION, only if I've actually had a red sensation. The attractive feature of this thesis is that, if it is true, it *does* seem to mark a division between phenomenal and other concepts. In the case of paradigmatic non-phenomenal concepts, like SOFA, or WATER, it is surely implausible that one could identify any particular experience which is such that if one has the concept one must have had that experience. In the case of RED SENSATION, on the other hand, it is at least initially quite plausible that one could identify such an experience, namely, the very sensation at issue. On this initial interpretation, therefore, the suggestion of the phenomenal concept strategy is that the experience thesis entails that phenomenal concepts are very different from other concepts, and this difference can be exploited to disarm the arguments against physicalism.

There is certainly a lot that is attractive in the phenomenal concept strategy as so far understood. If it is correct, perplexity about the relation between experience and the physical in the philosophy of mind derives largely from a conceptual mistake, rather than from a potentially chronic ignorance of the science, or from incoherence in the notion of experience, or from the inconsistency of that notion with known facts, or from a hard to articulate but powerful resistance to dualism. In short, the strategy offers a pleasingly deflationary account of what are perhaps the main problems in philosophy of mind.

But in this paper I argue that the strategy is mistaken. The argument will proceed on two fronts:

- (i) As against the response of the phenomenal concept strategy to the conceivability argument, I will argue that neither the experience thesis nor any replacement thesis has the consequences for that argument that are required by the strategy.
- (ii) As against the response of the phenomenal concept strategy to the knowledge argument, I will argue that the knowledge argument can be reformulated to avoid the phenomenal concept strategy's answer.

Taken together, these criticisms imply that the phenomenal concept strategy has offered no successful defense of physicalism against these arguments, and that those who

⁵ Notice that the experience thesis (as well as an alternative to the thesis I will discuss later) only articulates a necessary condition. That raises the interesting question of how to bring these theses up to necessary and sufficient conditions. But I will not pursue that question here.

suppose otherwise are mistaken. In the next section I set out the ways in which proponents of the phenomenal concept strategy have deployed the experience thesis in the defense of physicalism, and document the different forms that the strategy has assumed in recent literature. Subsequent sections are devoted to developing these criticisms and—more briefly—to an alternative proposal.⁶

2. The Strategy Articulated

Physicalism is the thesis that the phenomenal, or experiential, truths supervene with metaphysical necessity on the physical truths. A consequence of physicalism so stated is this: if P is a statement summarizing the physical truths of the world and P^* is a statement summarizing the phenomenal truths, then the conditional (1)—I will call it *the psychophysical conditional*—is necessarily true:⁷

(1) If P then P^*

Most arguments against physicalism proceed by directly attacking the psychophysical conditional and then inferring by modus tollens that physicalism itself is false. The most prominent arguments in the recent literature are the conceivability argument and the knowledge argument.⁸

2.1. The Conceivability Argument.

According to the conceivability argument, I can conceive of someone physically identical to me and yet who lacks experiences altogether, or alternatively who has experiences very different from mine.⁹ But this is just to say that I can conceive of a situation in which the psychophysical conditional is false, that is, in which the antecedent is true and

⁶ For criticisms of the phenomenal concept strategy that are distinct from mine, see Daly 1998, Chalmers 1999, 2000, Levine 2001, and MacDonald 2000.

⁷ This is a somewhat rough and ready statement of physicalism and the supervenience thesis implicit in it, but it will do for our purposes. See, e.g., Jackson 1998 for a more refined statement. I am not suggesting that physicalism is *identical* with the psychophysical conditional: for one thing, physicalism is contingent while the psychophysical conditional is necessary. It is rather that one can derive one from the other given the contingent facts that P is the statement which summarizes the physical truths and P^* is the statement which summarizes the phenomenal truths. Note also that it may be that neither P nor P^* can be formulated in a language we can understand, but let us set that aside.

⁸ Proponents of the phenomenal concept strategy often apply the strategy also to issues concerning the explanatory gap (see, e.g. Levine 2001); indeed, in Tye 1999, Papineau 1999 and Sturgeon 2001, the discussion is primarily focused on the explanatory gap. But because the notion of explanation is a somewhat delicate one, I will set aside this issue here.

⁹ For the most prominent recent defense of the conceivability argument, see Chalmers 1996. The argument can be developed in somewhat different ways. One might say that one can conceive a situation in which someone identical to me lacks experiences altogether, or that those experiences are inverted with respect to mine, or that those experiences are alien with respect to mine. These differences will not matter for our discussion, and so I will set them aside.

the consequent false. But if I can conceive of a situation like this, surely—says the proponent of the conceivability argument—the simplest explanation is that it really is possible. On the other hand, if it is possible that the psychophysical conditional is false, then that conditional must be either false or contingent. As we have seen, however, if physicalism is true, the psychophysical conditional is necessarily true. So putting the conceivability claim together with the necessity of the psychophysical conditional results in the conclusion that physicalism is false.

The physicalist who appeals to the phenomenal concept strategy seems to have a ready answer. This answer can be divided into two parts. The first part maintains that the psychophysical condition is a necessary a posteriori truth. A suggestion common to all versions of the phenomenal concept strategy is that phenomenal truths are (as it is usually put) conceptually irreducible, i.e. there is no a priori entailment from the physical to the phenomenal. Putting this together with physicalism itself means that (1) is necessary *and* a posteriori. The importance of this part of the answer to the conceivability argument is that, if the psychophysical conditional is necessary and a posteriori, arguments from conceivability to possibility with respect to that conditional will fail: being necessary, the psychophysical conditional is not such that it is possibly false; being a posteriori, the conditional is such that one can in some sense conceive of its being false.

The second part of the answer discharges an obligation¹⁰ that is often incurred when one says that a statement is necessary and a posteriori. The obligation, in Kripke's (1980) terms, is to explain away the appearance of contingency that will attach to many posteriori necessary truths and which certainly attaches to the psychophysical conditional. Kripke himself provided one strategy for explaining away the appearance of contingency. According to this strategy, the appearance of contingency is explained, to put it rather roughly, by supposing that we are mistaking the necessary statement we are actually making with a contingent statement that we might be making. But unfortunately, this strategy seemed to be without application in the psychophysical case, or at any rate so Kripke argued.¹¹ Indeed, it was for this reason that Kripke went on to attack, rather than defend, physicalism in lecture III of *Naming and Necessity*.

According to the phenomenal concept strategy, however, one can discharge this obligation without following Kripke's advice about how to do so, and thus without running into the difficulty that he himself ran into. Instead, one appeals to the difference

¹⁰ My use of deontic language here follows Hill and McLaughlin 1999. See also Hill 1997. It is important to note that this language embodies an assumption that may be denied, viz. that the conceivability argument and knowledge argument have a prima facie plausibility that needs to be addressed. Some philosophers might take a more radical view, according to which, once one properly appreciates the distinction between epistemology and metaphysics, then these arguments fail to be even prima facie plausible. I want to set aside this more radical view in this paper. Proponents of the phenomenal concept strategy, as I understand them, don't deny that the argument are prima facie plausible; rather they are advancing a novel idea about how to explain this prima facie plausibility away.

¹¹ Whether Kripke is right to argue this is controversial, but in company with the philosophers who endorse the phenomenal concept strategy, I will assume so here. For recent discussion, see Jackson 1998 and Chalmers 1996.

between phenomenal and other concepts. This difference has, according to the proposal, the result that the statement at issue is a posteriori, and therefore appears to be contingent: “such statements are a posteriori because of certain facts about the sensory and physical concepts expressed by the physical and sensory terms the statements contain as constituents” (Hill and McLaughlin 1999, p. 447). However, since these facts about sensory and physical concepts do not rule out the possibility that statements involving them are necessary, we arrive at an answer to the conceivability argument.

2.2. *The Knowledge Argument.*

The application of the phenomenal concept strategy to the knowledge argument is, on most developments of the view, similar but different. According to the knowledge argument, it appears to be possible for a suitably placed logically omniscient subject—Jackson’s Mary (1986) is the best-known example¹²—to know all the physical truths yet not know the phenomenal truths. What this means in effect is that it is possible for someone to know the antecedent of the psychophysical conditional, to work out the logical consequences of the antecedent, and yet not know the conditional itself, because they do not know its consequent. But how could this be possible if physicalism is true and thus the psychophysical conditional is both true and necessary? Surely—says the proponent of the knowledge argument—the best explanation is simply that the psychophysical conditional is either false or contingent. But on either possibility, physicalism is false, since as we have seen physicalism entails that the psychophysical conditional is necessarily true.

Once again, physicalists who appeal to the phenomenal concept strategy seem to have a ready answer. By hypothesis Mary has not had certain experiences, and thus by the experience thesis, does not possess certain phenomenal concepts. Without those concepts, she could not so much as *understand* the psychophysical conditional, since she does not have the concepts required to understand its consequent. If she does not so much as understand the conditional, however, she could hardly be expected to know it.¹³ For related reasons, she could not be expected to *deduce* phenomenal truths from physical truths. For to deduce phenomenal truths from physical truths one would have to know, and so understand, the psychophysical conditional. On the other hand, this account of Mary’s ignorance does not contradict the possibility that the psychophysical conditional is true and necessary—a statement can be necessarily true even if someone is not in a

¹² Jackson 1986, 291: “Mary is confined to a black-and-white room, is educated through black-and-white books and through lectures relayed on black-and-white television. In this way she learns everything there is to know about the physical nature of the world...It seems, however, that Mary does not know all there is to know. For when she is let out of the black-and-white room or given a color television, she will learn what it is like to see something red, say...Hence physicalism is false.”

¹³Tye 2000, 17: “A...promising strategy is to argue that Mary, while she is confined, lacks the phenomenal concept RED...It follows that there is a thought that Mary cannot think to herself while in her room, namely the thought *that this is the experience of red*.” See also Harman 1990 and Byrne 1999. Loar 1997 does not follow this course with respect to the knowledge argument, emphasizing the similarities rather than the differences between it and the conceivability argument.

position to understand it. Hence the experience thesis appears to disarm the knowledge argument.¹⁴

2.3. *Varieties of the Strategy.*

In sum, the phenomenal concept strategy seems to suggest a way of defending physicalism against its main criticisms. Before proceeding, however, it is important to note that, while the exposition of the phenomenal concept strategy that I have just presented captures one version of the position, it by no means captures all versions. There are two main complications to consider.

First, many presentations of the strategy do not rely on the notion of concept *possession* in quite the way that I have done, or at least do not explicitly do so, and instead draw the crucial distinction between phenomenal and non-phenomenal concepts in a different way. Papineau (1999), for example, places the emphasis at least sometimes on concept *acquisition* rather than concept possession. For Sturgeon (2001), the emphasis is on concept *application*, where a thesis about concept application is an epistemological thesis about what conditions must be met in order that one is justified in applying a phenomenal concept in the first place. For Hill and McLaughlin (1999), the basic idea is developed via a discussion of the epistemological norms that govern the *faculties* that are involved in the deployment of the relevant concepts. For them, what is important is the fact that phenomenal concepts bear a constitutive relation to introspection and judgment. In some of these cases, it is clear that the philosophers in question hold the experience thesis *in addition* to these other theses. But a complication arises nevertheless because, even if they hold the experience thesis, it is not clear that they use that thesis to answer the arguments in the way that I have suggested.

Second, even if we restrict attention to versions of the strategy that do appeal to the idea of concept possession, not all of these versions appeal to the experience thesis in particular. As we have noted, the experience thesis is useful for purposes of exposition not only because it is both familiar and clear, but also because it articulates something which I think would be agreed on by most proponents of a concept possession version of the phenomenal concept strategy, namely that there is *some* philosophically important link between *possessing* a phenomenal concept and having the relevant experience. Nevertheless, the experience thesis is subject to persuasive counter-examples,¹⁵ and it

¹⁴ Why not answer the knowledge argument in the same way as the conceivability argument? The answer is that the knowledge argument as usually developed focuses on the example of Mary, and the fact is that Mary might know plenty of truths which are necessary and a posteriori (e.g. 'water is H₂O'). (For discussion, see Stoljar 2000.) We will see later on, however, that the knowledge argument can be developed on the basis of examples which are significantly different from Mary, and this brings it much closer to the conceivability argument.

¹⁵ The experience thesis is typical of a traditional empiricist approach to understanding and concept possession, a tradition famously given voice by Hume's remark in the *Treatise* that "We cannot form to ourselves the idea of a pine-apple, without having actually tasted it" (I.I.i. p. 5). On the other hand, it has also been felt by many philosophers that this aspect of the empiricist tradition is quite mistaken. The classic statement is Unger 1966, who argues that it is easy enough to imagine someone who has the concept of a pineapple but who has not actually tasted one. For further discussion see Lewis 1988, Daly 1998, and Stoljar 2000.

would be mistaken to suppose that the success of the phenomenal concept strategy, or even its concept possession version, rests on the truth of that thesis.

One example of an alternative to the experience thesis is developed in Loar 1997. Loar's position is summarized in the slogan: phenomenal concepts are recognitional concepts. To put things in our terms, this implies the following thesis about the possession of phenomenal concepts:

Recognition Thesis: *S* possesses the (phenomenal) concept *C* of experience *E* only if *S* has certain dispositions to recognize, discriminate and identify *E* if *S* has or undergoes *E*.

The difference between the recognition thesis and the experience thesis is that only the latter implies that having the experience is *necessary* for having the concept. It is true that Loar sometimes emphasizes the role of experiences in someone's coming to instantiate the relevant dispositions.¹⁶ But this emphasis seems mainly to be a point about concept acquisition rather than concept possession, and thus is only a (perhaps plausible) contingent accompaniment of the recognition thesis rather than essential to it. The upshot is that appealing to Loar's recognition thesis provides an alternative way of spelling out the concept possession version of the phenomenal concept strategy, and therefore provides a complication for the presentation of the strategy that we have adopted so far.

My policy in dealing with these complications is as follows. On the one hand, I will conduct the discussion mainly in terms of the version of the strategy that I have set out. On the other hand, I will keep one eye focused on the other versions. If there are points in the arguments to follow where different versions of strategy might seem to do better than the one I am mainly concerned with, I will consider those different versions. To anticipate, I think that doing so does not affect the argumentation in any serious way, but readers must judge for themselves whether I am right in thinking this.¹⁷

3. The Phenomenal Concept Strategy and the Conceivability Argument.

We have seen that, in the course of responding to the conceivability argument, the phenomenal concept strategist tries to establish two points: (a) that the psychophysical conditional is a necessary and a posteriori truth, and in consequence that arguments from

¹⁶ For example, in explaining his view, Loar suggests the following case: "Suppose you go into the California desert and spot a succulent *never seen before*. You become adept at recognizing instances, and gain a recognitional command of their kind, without a name for it; you are disposed to identify positive and negative instances and thereby pick out a kind" (1997, p. 600, emphasis added).

¹⁷ There is something else here that should be mentioned, viz., that my exposition does not speak to the question of whether phenomenal concepts are a species of indexical or demonstrative concept. Loar's (1997) version of the strategy makes this assimilation, but many others—for example, Tye's (1999)—do not. (For an extended discussion of the relation between phenomenal and indexical or demonstrative concepts, see Perry 2001.) So far as I can see, however, the question of the precise relation between phenomenal and indexical concepts will not affect what I want to say and so I will set it aside.

conceivability to possibility will fail with respect to that conditional; and (b) that the experience thesis can explain away the appearance of contingency which attaches to the psychophysical conditional, and, moreover, can do so in a way that does not run into the trouble that Kripke famously ran into.

The criticism that I want now to advance attacks (b). Following Hill and McLaughlin (1999), it seems most natural to view the project of explaining away the appearance of the contingency of the psychophysical conditional as the project of explaining or justifying the claim that the psychophysical conditional is a posteriori. Given the way we have been understanding matters so far, it in turn seems most natural to interpret the strategy as supposing that the experience thesis, or perhaps the division in concepts that it brings in its train, is the crucial factor in carrying out this project. To put it in a sentence: according to the strategy, if the experience thesis is true, the psychophysical conditional is a posteriori. However, it is precisely this last claim that I think is a mistake. Indeed, as I will now go on to argue, whether the experience thesis is true is one thing, and whether the psychophysical conditional is a posteriori is quite another.

3.1. *The A priori and the A priori Synthesizable.*

In order to develop this objection, let us first distinguish two claims one might make about a conditional of the form ‘If *A* then *B*’ which is presumed to be necessarily true:

- (2) ‘If *A* then *B*’ is such that a sufficiently logically acute person who possessed only the concepts required to understand it, is in position to know that it is true.
- (3) ‘If *A* then *B*’ is such that a sufficiently logically acute person who possessed only the concepts required to understand *its antecedent*, is in a position to know that it is true.

To mark the distinction at issue here, let us say that if (2) is true, the relevant conditional is *a priori*, whereas if (3) is true, the relevant conditional is *a priori synthesizable*.

Now, what is the relation between being a priori and being a priori synthesizable? Presumably, being a priori synthesizable entails being a priori: if one is in a position to know that a conditional is true merely by understanding its antecedent, one is in a position to know that it is true by understanding it itself. But the reverse entailment does not hold: conditionals which are a priori might for all that fail to be a priori synthesizable. To illustrate, consider (4):

- (4) If *x* is rectangular, then *x* has some property or other.

It is obvious that (4) is a priori if it is true: (4) is such that a person who possessed the concepts required to understand it (and who knew enough logic) would be in a position to know that it is true. But (4) is certainly not a priori synthesizable. In order to understand the consequent of (4) one would need to have the (ontological) concept PROPERTY, as well as the concepts involved in quantification over properties. In order to understand its antecedent, on the other hand, one only needs to have the concept RECTANGLE. But

possessing the concept RECTANGLE is not at all sufficient for possessing the concept PROPERTY.¹⁸ The upshot is that to know the truth of (4) it is not sufficient merely to understand its antecedent.

Having distinguished the a priori from the a priori synthesizable, we are now in a position to argue that the experience thesis does not entail or imply that the psychophysical conditional (1) is a posteriori:

(1) If P then P^*

I will assume to begin with that the claim that (1) is a posteriori is simply the claim that (1) is not a priori, and so the central question is whether it is plausible to suppose that the experience thesis entails or otherwise suggests that (1) is not a priori. But the answer to this question is no.

It is plausible to say that the experience thesis entails that (1) is not a priori synthesizable. For, if the experience thesis is true, one cannot have the concepts required to understand the consequent of (1) without having the relevant experiences. Since no such condition plausibly attaches to the antecedent, it would seem quite possible to possess the concepts required to understand the antecedent of (1) and yet not be in a position to know that it is true—in other words, (1) is not a priori synthesizable. But as we have seen, to say that (1) is not a priori synthesizable leaves open the possibility that it is a priori: so far, (1) might in relevant respects be like (4). So there seems to be a logical gap in the suggestion that the experience thesis tells us that (1) is a posteriori. What we wanted was a reason to suppose that it is not a priori. But what we have is a reason to suppose that it is not a priori synthesizable.

3.2. *Objections and Replies.*

How might a proponent of the phenomenal concept strategy respond to this objection?

First, one might say that, while in principle there is a division between the a priori and the a priori synthesizable, in practice this can be ignored, because examples like (4) are too *unlike* examples like (1). No application of the experience thesis or any analogous thesis is plausible in the case of (4)—it might be said—and for that reason it and the distinction it illustrates can be set aside.

However, while (4) is certainly unlike (1) there are different examples which make the same point. Presumably, if one needs to have experiences to understand a particular concept C , one would likewise require those experiences to understand concepts which are complex but which contain C as a constituent. Thus, for example, if one needs to have the relevant experience to possess the concept RED SENSATION, one would likewise require the experience to possess the concept NOT-A-RED-FEELING-SENSATION.¹⁹ But now consider the conditional in (5):

¹⁸ Another example of the same phenomenon might be ‘if x is red then x is not green’. It is plausible to say that this statement is a priori in the sense that if one understands it one knows that it is true. But it is quite implausible to say that it is a priori synthesizable.

¹⁹ Here I follow Fodor 1998. There are controversial aspects of Fodor’s position but this is not one of them.

(5) If x is a number then x is not a red sensation.

(5) is relevantly like (1) in that the experience thesis is true, if true at all, of its consequent but not of its antecedent. Yet it seems obvious that (5) is a priori but not a priori synthesizable. So once again we face our original problem: the experience thesis plausibly tells us that (1) and (5) are not a priori synthesizable. But for all that they remain (or could remain) a priori.

Second, one might respond by agreeing that the experience thesis only entails that (1) is not a priori synthesizable, but suggesting that this is sufficient for the purposes of the phenomenal concept strategy.

But it is not sufficient. If the phenomenal concept strategy were directed only at the knowledge argument, then considerations of a priori synthesizability *might be* sufficient. After all, the fact, if it is a fact, that the psychophysical conditional is not a priori synthesizable might explain why Mary might know its antecedent without knowing its consequent.²⁰ But as we have seen, the phenomenal concept strategy is aimed in addition at the conceivability argument, and here it is crucial, not only that (1) is not a priori synthesizable, but that it is not a priori. The claim that (1) is not a priori synthesizable is irrelevant to the question of whether I can conceive of someone physically identical to me and yet phenomenally different and if so what follows from this fact. But the claim that (1) is not a priori is precisely relevant to this question. The problem for proponents of the phenomenal concept strategy is that they seem to have mistaken one claim for the other.

Third, one might suggest that my account of the dialectical situation here is mistaken. I have been assuming that the phenomenal concept strategy employs the experience thesis to explain *why* (1) is a posteriori. And the reason for assuming this has been that this seems the best way of interpreting Kripke's demand that one *explain away* the fact that (1) *seems* contingent. But one might suggest that this interpretation is mistaken and that the strategy is more straightforward, namely, to suggest that if the experience thesis is true in the case of the consequent of (1), then (1) will appear contingent, even if it is not. And perhaps this is a different proposal from the one we have been considering.

I have some doubts that this way of taking matters is in fact very different from the way we have been taking them all along.²¹ But in any case, the examples we have introduced will defeat this version of the phenomenal concept strategy just as surely as the original version. For consider (5) again. (5) is necessary and does not even *appear* to be contingent. Nevertheless the relevant claims about concept possession are true of it. So the fact that these claims about concept possession are true of a statement does not

²⁰ I will argue in §4.1, however, that even this consideration is ultimately ineffective against the knowledge argument.

²¹ Hill and McLaughlin (1999), for example, tend to use these two ideas interchangeably.

mean that the statement appears to be contingent. Hence the relevant claims about concept possession cannot explain why (1) appears to be contingent even if it is necessary.

Finally, one might suggest that, while the point I have made holds good against versions of the phenomenal concept strategy that adopt the experience thesis as the background account of concept possession, versions such as those of Loar which adopt another account of concept possession will do better.

Now, discussing all possible versions of the concept possession version would require a level of detailed discussion that we can't attempt here; but it is not necessary to go into those details in order to see that this suggestion is mistaken. According to all the accounts of concept possession that might plausibly be appealed to by the phenomenal concept strategy, there is some important link between having a concept and having a particular experience. Since it is plausible to say that there is no such link in the case of physical concepts, there is always the possibility of arguing that the psychophysical conditional is not a priori synthesizable. But the problem is that this makes no advance on the central point, viz., how to move from something's not being a priori synthesizable to something's not being a priori. A different account of concept possession will not help with this problem, and therefore will not help with the basis of the objection to the phenomenal concept strategy that I have so far developed.

The conclusion to which we are headed is this: the concept possession version of the phenomenal concept strategy does not have an answer to the conceivability argument. In order to have an answer one needs to explain or justify the idea that (1) is a posteriori, or equivalently, not a priori. But this has not been done. It is true of course that if the experience thesis is true, (1) is not a priori synthesizable. But a priori synthesizability is not sufficient for the purposes of the strategy.

3.3. Examination of Alternatives.

Our argument to this point has concentrated exclusively on concept possession versions of the phenomenal concept strategy. However, as we noted earlier, not all versions of the strategy rely on the idea of concept possession. So, before we can claim to have established a general conclusion about the ability of the strategy to answer the conceivability argument, we will need to consider those alternative versions.

As we saw in §2.3, there are three alternatives to consider: a concept acquisition version, a concept application version and a conceptual faculties version. I will consider these proposals in turn.

Where theories of concept possession purport to be a priori theories about what the state of possessing a concept consists in, theories of concept acquisition are empirical theories about what as a matter of fact (or as a matter of psychological law) happens to subjects when they come to possess concepts (Fodor 1998). So the concept acquisition version of the strategy would say that the experience thesis is, properly interpreted, a theory of concept acquisition according to which human beings as they actually are must, as a matter of nomological fact, have had the relevant experiences if they are to acquire phenomenal concepts.

But of course, whatever the merits of this view, it is hard to see how it has any bearing on the question of whether (1) is a priori or not. Surely the psychological question of how one comes to have the concepts involved in a statement is one thing, and the epistemological question of whether that statement is a priori is another.

Where theories of concept acquisition are empirical theories about how subjects as a matter of fact come to acquire concepts, theories of concept application are epistemological theories about what is required for the justified application of a concept. So the concept application version of the phenomenal concept strategy would say that the experience thesis is, properly interpreted, a thesis to the effect that one is not justified in applying a phenomenal concept unless one has had the relevant experience. On this basis, one might say that any belief or statement which involves such a concept cannot fail to be a posteriori. So on this version of the strategy it is all too obvious why the psychophysical conditional is a posteriori.

However, the problem with this suggestion is that the principle behind it is straightforwardly subject to counterexample. Whatever it means precisely to say that one is not justified in applying a concept without having a certain experience, it cannot follow from this that every statement which involves that concept is a posteriori. For consider: a claim such as (5) is obviously a priori, and yet it involves applications of phenomenal concepts to the very same extent that (1) does. So it seems that moving to a concept application version of the experience thesis is no help in explaining why (1) is a posteriori.

The last alternative appeals to the idea of conceptual or psychological faculties. As in the case of concept acquisition, it is initially hard to see how a *psychological* faculty version of the phenomenal concept strategy is going to have a bearing on the *epistemological* status of (1). But, as Hill and McLaughlin develop this idea, a difference in conceptual faculties amounts essentially to a difference in the relevant concepts themselves.²² They write:

The epistemic constraints that govern our use of sensory concepts are orthogonal to those that govern our use of physical concepts. When one uses a sensory concept to classify one's own current experiences, the experiences that guide and justify one in applying the concept are always identical with the experiences to which the concept is applied. Sensory states are self-presenting states: we experience them, but we do not have sensory experiences of them. We experience them simply by virtue of being in them. Sensory concepts are recognitional concepts: deploying such concepts, we can introspectively recognize when we are in sensory states simply by focusing our attention directly on them. Matters are of course quite different in the case of perceptual and theoretical concepts. An agent's access to the phenomena that he or she perceives is always indirect: it always occurs via an

²² As Hill and McLaughlin also discuss a different idea, one that derives from an apparent distinction between two sorts of imagination distinguished in footnote 11 in Nagel 1974. (Hill 1997 presents an extended development of this suggestion.) I think the remarks in the text apply equally to this version but I will not attempt to argue for that here.

experience of the perceived phenomena that is not identical with the perceived phenomena but it is rather caused by it (1999, p. 449-50).

To put things in our terms, what Hill and McLaughlin are saying here is that the phenomenal concept RED SENSATION is different from any physical concept in the following sense. It is a conceptual truth that if I have a red sensation, and if I have the concepts and focus my attention on the matter, I will *thereby* come to know (or at least justifiably believe) that I am having a red sensation—red sensations are *self-presenting*, as Hill and McLaughlin say. On the other hand, it is not a conceptual truth, in fact it is not obviously true at all, that if I am in some overall physical condition *P*, and if I have the concepts and focus my attention on the matter, I will *thereby* come to know that I am—knowledge that I am in *P* must at least involve further perceptual examination of my surroundings and maybe much else besides. We can summarize this point by saying that phenomenal concepts are, while physical concepts are not, *self-presenting* concepts²³ in the sense that the states that fall under phenomenal concepts are self-presenting.²⁴

Now, as an observation about one difference between physical and phenomenal concepts this is certainly plausible: phenomenal concepts *do* seem to bear a constitutive connection to introspection in just the way that Hill and McLaughlin say. Moreover, this is a difference that is quite distinct from the one marked by the experience thesis. To divide concepts according to whether they are self-presenting is clearly not to divide them according to whether their possession conditions involve the having of relevant experiences. As Hill and McLaughlin go on to argue, however, this is all the difference that matters for the purposes of the phenomenal concept strategy:

Given these differences between sensory [i.e., phenomenal] concepts and physical concepts, a sensory state and its nomologically correlated brain state would seem contingently related, even if they were necessarily one. (1999, p.449)

Again, to put things in our terms, what Hill and McLaughlin are saying here is that because of the difference between physical and phenomenal concepts, we have an explanation of why statements such as (1) seem contingent. In short, we seem here to have a version of the phenomenal concept strategy quite different from the versions we have been considering so far, but that also seems to be successful.

I agree the conceptual faculty version of the strategy is different from anything we have been considering so far. But I don't agree it is successful. On the contrary, it faces a variation of the problem we have already outlined. For consider: presumably NOT A RED SENSATION is self-presenting just as RED SENSATION is: if one possessed the concept NOT A RED SENSATION one could apply it simply in virtue of being in the state, or, in this case, not being in the state. On the other hand the concept NUMBER is presumably not self-presenting; if anything is a theoretical concept in Hill and MacLaughlin's sense, this one surely is. But now consider (5) again. (5) brings together the phenomenal concept NOT A

²³As can be seen from the passage quoted, Hill and McLaughlin use the phrase 'recognitional concept' rather than 'self-presenting concept'. To distinguish their position from Loar's however, I will use the latter phrase.

²⁴Sturgeon 2001 also discusses self-presenting concepts.

RED SENSATION and the theoretical concept NUMBER. So what Hill and MacLaughlin's proposal predicts in this case is that (5) should *appear* contingent or a posteriori even if it isn't. But as we have seen (5) does not appear this way; it is obviously both necessary and a priori. In short, even if the epistemological features that Hill and MacLaughlin appeal to are in place, it does not follow that there is any appearance of contingency or a posteriority.

It might be objected that NOT A RED SENSATION is not a self-presenting concept in the sense intended by Hill and MacLaughlin; perhaps negations of self-presenting concepts are not themselves self-presenting. But there is good reason to be doubtful about this. It is true of course that anything at all could fail to have a red sensation. But we are interested here, not in what things satisfy the concept but in the "epistemic constraints that govern the use" of the concept (Hill and MacLaughlin, 1999, p.449-50). At least in one's own case, it is difficult to see why these epistemic constraints should be different if one is deploying a phenomenal concept as opposed to deploying its negated counterpart.

Alternatively, it might be suggested that Hill and MacLaughlin's account is not designed to deal with such necessary and a priori truths as (5). In an earlier paper Hill writes "my claims...have been restricted to intuitions that have implications concerning *a posteriori* questions about matters of fact" (1997; p.82). However, this is a statement only about the *intended* scope of their proposal, not about its *actual* scope. Of course Hill and MacLaughlin *want* their account to be limited to necessary and a posteriori truths. But the problem is that there is nothing in the account that justifies this limitation.

3.4. *A Further Problem*

In addition to the problem about negations of phenomenal concepts, there is a further objection for Hill and MacLaughlin that I wish to advance. This objection starts from the observation that the conceivability argument against physicalism is in structure identical to arguments that are used throughout philosophy and philosophy of mind in particular. One of these is (what I will call) the conceivability argument against supervenient behaviorism, the thesis that the phenomenal truths supervene with metaphysical necessity on the behavioral truths, i.e. truths concerning actual and potential behavior.²⁵ A consequence of behaviorism so stated is this: if *B* is a statement summarizing the behavioral truths of the world and *P** is a statement summarizing the phenomenal truths, the conditional (1*)—I will call it *the psychobehavioral conditional*—is necessarily true:

(1*) If *B* then *P**

On the other hand, according to the conceivability argument against supervenient behaviorism, I can conceive of someone behaviorally identical to me and yet who lacks experiences altogether, or alternatively who has experiences very different from mine.

²⁵ For a discussion of supervenient behaviorism, see Block 1995 and Braddon Mitchell and Jackson 1996. It should be noted that the version of supervenient behaviorism that is relevant for us concerns phenomenal truths rather than intentional truths.

But this is just to say that I can conceive of a situation in which the psychobehavioral conditional is false. And of course, if that is so, then (1*) is at best contingent and supervenient behaviorism is false.

Now, I take it as a datum that this argument against behaviorism is a good one. Of course, this is not to say that there might not be *other* arguments against behaviorism. The point is only that *this* one is a good one. On the other hand, the problem for Hill and McLaughlin is that, if their version of the phenomenal concept strategy is correct, the conceivability argument against behaviorism is *not* a good argument. For there is nothing in their position to prevent a behaviorist from responding as follows: “Phenomenal concepts are self-presenting, while behavioral concepts are not. Given these differences between phenomenal concepts and behavioral concepts, a phenomenal state and its nomologically correlated behavioral state would seem contingently related, even if they were necessarily one. Hence the conceivability argument against behaviorism is mistaken.” If it is accepted, as I think it should be, that is not a successful response on the part of the behaviorist, then I think it should likewise be accepted that Hill and McLaughlin’s version of the phenomenal concept strategy is also unsuccessful.

In fact, the introduction of the conceivability argument against supervenient behaviorism permits us to make a criticism of the phenomenal concept strategy more general than any we have discussed so far. We have seen that *any* version of the strategy—not simply the conceptual faculty version—says that the conceivability argument can be disarmed by considering the special features of phenomenal concepts viz. a viz. non-phenomenal or theoretical concepts. The difference between the various versions of strategy emerges only when we ask what these special features are: concept possession versions, for example, say that what is special is something to do with concept possession, and similarly for concept application versions, conceptual faculties versions and so on. However, whatever factor *precisely* is supposed to set phenomenal concepts apart from theoretical concepts, that factor must likewise set phenomenal concepts apart from *behavioral* concepts, for behavioral concepts are a sub-class of theoretical concepts. (Clearly, if a class of concepts *C* are distinct in some respect from another class *C**, they are likewise distinct in that respect from a third class *C#*, if *C#* is sub-class of *C**.) But from this it follows that *any* version of the phenomenal concept strategy will have the consequence that the conceivability argument against behaviorism is a not a good argument. But as we have seen, it is very implausible that this is so.

3.5. Conclusion

We argued earlier that the concept possession versions of the phenomenal concept strategy have produced no answer to the conceivability argument. What we have now seen is that the concept acquisition, concept application, and conceptual faculties versions likewise have produced no answer. In order to have an answer to that argument, it is not sufficient merely to assert to that (1) is necessary and a posteriori. In addition, the appearance of contingency that attaches to (1) must be explained away—something that Kripke famously thought could not be done. The novel idea of the phenomenal concept strategy is that this appearance *can* (*pace* Kripke) be explained way, namely by appealing

to the difference between phenomenal and other concepts. But the material I have presented suggests that this novel idea is mistaken.

4. The Phenomenal Concept Strategy and The Knowledge Argument.

So far I have argued that neither the experience thesis nor any replacement theses has the consequence for the conceivability argument that the phenomenal concept strategy requires. In this section I take up the response of the phenomenal concept strategy to the knowledge argument. As we saw in §2.2, the central part of this response goes as follows: the experience thesis is true, hence Mary lacks the phenomenal concepts, hence she does not know the psychophysical conditional, and hence cannot know or deduce the phenomenal truths. The objection I want now to advance agrees that this might be plausible in the case of Mary, but questions the application of this idea to the knowledge argument.

4.1. Mary and Experienced Mary.

Even if we agree that the experience thesis is true, and thus that Mary lacks phenomenal concepts, it is not at all obvious that this is sufficient to answer the knowledge argument. The reason is that there are different sorts of examples on the basis of which the knowledge argument might be developed, and not all of these have the protagonist lacking phenomenal concepts.

One of these is (what I will call) the example of Experienced Mary. Experienced Mary is exactly like Mary for the first part of the story. Both grow up in the black-and-white environment, and both eventually escape to have red and other sensations. The difference is that Experienced Mary is unfortunate enough to be recaptured and returned to her room.²⁶ Not only that, however, but the nature of her capture is such that she develops partial amnesia. She loses none of the purely physical knowledge that she knew so impressively before her release. Nor does she forget *some* of her phenomenal knowledge. She remembers, for example, what red sensations are like—hence it is plausible to say that she does not lose any phenomenal concepts. What she forgets, however, is phenomenal knowledge of another sort—knowledge of cases in which these phenomenal concepts are correctly applied. Thus what she forgets are truths of the form ‘Fred’s arthritis causes him pain’, and ‘Looking at Granny Smith apples causes green sensations’. In forgetting these truths, it is not that Experienced Mary does not know

²⁶ The Experienced Mary example is similar to two other examples in the literature. First, Lewis 1988 discusses a slightly different case in which Mary is recaptured and forgets. In Lewis’ case, Mary forgets (e.g.) what it is like to see green, whereas in the case discussed in the text, she remembers what it is like to see green, and forgets only phenomenal truths of another kind. Second, Nida-Rümelin 1995 introduces the example of Mariana who is allowed to see colors but cannot identify them. Nida-Rümelin uses the Mariana example mainly to make about point about the nature of phenomenal concepts and belief, but she goes on to say (p. 232) “A disadvantage of Jackson’s example is that it fails to distinguish two steps of epistemic progress that can be distinguished”, the two steps in question being, roughly, (i) coming to possess certain concepts, and (ii) coming to know certain truths wherein those concepts are applied. My position may be viewed as a development of Nida-Rümelin’s here.

(e.g.) what pain is like, nor is it that she could not imagine a possibility in which Fred's arthritis causes him pain. It is simply that she does not and cannot know or deduce that Fred's arthritis *does* cause him pain. Nothing she knows, for example, rules out the possibility that his arthritis might cause nausea or perhaps nothing at all.

Now, it is perfectly possible to develop the knowledge argument on the basis of the example of Experienced Mary rather than on the example of Mary. For Experienced Mary is someone who knows the antecedent of the psychophysical conditional—she knows all the physical truths about Fred, for example, and about Granny Smith apples. But she does not know the consequent of the psychophysical conditional. The consequent of that conditional summarizes all the phenomenal truths of the world, including both truths such as seeing red is like such and such and also truths such as Fred's arthritis causes him pain. However, since Experienced Mary does not know these latter truths, she does not know the consequent of the psychophysical conditional, and so, one might suppose, the psychophysical conditional itself. At this point, however, the argument proceeds as before. If we can imagine someone, Experienced Mary, who knows the antecedent of the psychophysical conditional, then surely—says the proponent of the knowledge argument—the best explanation is that this conditional is either contingent or false. But on either possibility, physicalism is false, for physicalism entails that the psychophysical conditional is necessarily true.

But now it is quite plain what the problem is for the proponent of the phenomenal concept strategy. In the case of Mary, it is plausible to say that her ignorance was explained by her lack of phenomenal concepts. But in the case of Experienced Mary, this is no longer plausible. For by assumption Experienced Mary has had the relevant experiences, and, if she has had the relevant experiences, the experience thesis cannot be invoked to support the idea that she lacks any concepts. On the other hand, the ignorance of Experienced Mary is quite sufficient of mount the knowledge argument, for Experienced Mary presents a case in which someone knows the physical truths, and yet does not know and cannot deduce the phenomenal truths. More generally, once we see that the knowledge argument can be divorced from the particular details of the example of Mary, it is clear that the truth of the experience thesis is quite irrelevant to the soundness of that argument.

Earlier we noted that the claim that the psychophysical conditional is not a priori synthesizable is not enough to answer the conceivability argument. What we have just seen is that this claim is not enough to answer the knowledge argument either. Certainly, if one is concentrating only on the example of Mary, failure of a priori synthesizability can *seem* sufficient. However, this is of no particular relevance to the knowledge argument per se for the simple reason that the knowledge argument can be developed on the basis of the example of Experienced Mary, rather than Mary. When confronted with the criticism that Mary lacks phenomenal concepts, a proponent of the knowledge argument can substitute Experienced Mary for Mary, but apart from that the argument is unaffected.²⁷

²⁷ The problem for the phenomenal concept strategy presented in the text has counterparts for a number of other ideas which are prominent in the literature on the knowledge argument. According to the ability hypothesis (cf. Nemirow 1990, Lewis 1988), for example, what Mary gains when she comes out of her

How might a proponent of the phenomenal concept strategy respond to this objection? The most obvious response is to withdraw the suggestion that Mary lacks certain phenomenal concepts or, alternatively, withdraw the suggestion that her lack of such a concept is relevant to the knowledge argument. Instead, a proponent of the phenomenal concept strategy might say that what the examples of Mary and Experienced Mary show is that the psychophysical conditional is a necessary a posteriori truth. But of course, if that is so then the response to the knowledge argument is in essence identical to the response to the conceivability argument. As we have already argued, however, the phenomenal concept strategy does not have an answer to the conceivability argument. In order to have such an answer, one must explain away the appearance of contingency of the relevant necessary truths. But this has not been done.

4.6. Diagnosis.

Why has it seemed so obvious to proponents of the phenomenal concept strategy, first, that Mary lacks certain phenomenal concepts and, second, that her doing so is relevant to the knowledge argument?

In my view, this situation develops from a failure to distinguish two quite different questions that one might raise in the context of the Mary example. The first question concerns what the conditions are for the possession of phenomenal concepts, and perhaps more generally of what it is to know what an experience is like. As we have seen, the Mary example tells us that the psychophysical conditional is not a priori synthesizable. What this means is that the possession of physical concepts is not alone sufficient for the possession of phenomenal concepts. But of course, this in turn raises the question of what *is* sufficient and in addition makes it vivid just how difficult it would be to say something illuminating and true on this topic.

The second question concerns the knowledge argument against physicalism, and the question of physicalism more generally. The example of Mary raises the possibility that someone who is logically omniscient might know all the physical truths and yet not know the phenomenal truths. But this is just to say that the Mary example raises the possibility that the psychophysical conditional is not a priori. On the other hand, the fact that the psychophysical conditional is not a priori presents a straightforward challenge to physicalism, as follows: If it not a priori, it is a posteriori and necessary. But if it is a posteriori and necessary, we must explain away its appearance of contingency. And if

room is not factual knowledge but simply an ability to imagine and recognize red. This proposal apparently escapes the knowledge argument since if Mary only gains an ability there is clearly no new proposition or fact that she learns. But the problem for this proposal is that, while it is plausible to say that Mary lacks the abilities, it is not plausible to say that Experienced Mary does. On the other hand, if one can raise the knowledge argument on the basis of Experienced Mary just as much as on the basis of Mary, the ability hypothesis will not help in answering the knowledge argument. (Analogous points applies to those, like Conee 1994 and Dretske 1999, who say that Mary comes to have acquaintance with or awareness of a property and so does not gain any factual knowledge.) In general, all three proposals—the phenomenal concept strategy, the ability hypothesis and the acquaintance hypothesis—focus on the idea of novel experiences. But Experienced Mary shows that novel experience plays only an inessential role in the knowledge argument. For further discussion of these points see Stoljar In Press.

that cannot be done—as Kripke famously argued it could not be—we must conclude that the psychophysical conditional is false.²⁸

However, these two questions are distinct, and moreover are raised by distinct features of the example. The question of physicalism can be raised against the background of the Mary example, but it might also be raised against the background of the example of Experienced Mary for which the question of concept possession is moot. So the question of physicalism responds to her lack of knowledge, and not directly to her lack of experience. On the other hand, the question of concept possession can be raised against the background of the Mary example, but it might also be raised against the background of examples such as those discussed by Unger (1966; cf. also fn. 15), for which the question of physicalism is moot. So the question of concept possession responds to Mary's lack of experience, and not directly to her lack of knowledge.

Of course, it is the interesting proposal of the phenomenal concept strategy—or at least of some versions of that strategy—that considerations of concept possession *will* play a role in the discussion of physicalism. What I am suggesting, however, is that this seems plausible only because one has failed to disentangle the two issues right from the start.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenal concept strategy is the strategy of appealing to differences between phenomenal and other concepts in order to answer the central arguments against physicalism. My criticism of the strategy has been twofold. First, the strategy has not managed to point to a difference between phenomenal and other concepts which explains the appearance of contingency that attaches to the psychophysical conditional. Second, the strategy has not managed to point to a difference between phenomenal and other concepts which explains why the truth of physicalism is consistent with the possibility that a physically and logically omniscient person could fail to know the psychophysical conditional. Taken together, these criticisms suggest that proponents of the phenomenal concept strategy are mistaken in supposing that they are in a position to answer the conceivability argument and the knowledge argument.

But of course, neither of these claims undermines the apparent fact that there is at least one important motivation for the phenomenal concept strategy. The motivation is that physicalism seems on the face of it much better than its alternatives, and also that, apart from the phenomenal concept strategy, the most prominent ways of defending physicalism—in particular the ability hypothesis due to Laurence Nemirow (1990) and David Lewis (1988)—seem to be subject to important criticisms, many of which have been developed with considerable ingenuity by proponents of the phenomenal concept strategy themselves (cf. Loar 1997, Tye 2000). If my criticisms of the phenomenal concept strategy are to have serious weight, therefore, I must at least be able to point to an alternative way of dealing with these problems. I will close the paper with an

²⁸ Notice that this is a different way of stating the knowledge argument than the one I employed in §2.2. Then we were laboring under the misapprehension that lack of experience was crucial to the argument. Now that we know better, however, a different formulation is in order. Cf. Loar 1997.

extremely brief sketch of an alternative way, which I will call *the missing concept strategy*.²⁹

One way to see the basic shape of the missing concept strategy emerges when we consider an attack on physicalism quite different in focus from the ones we have been considering, Descartes' famous argument about language in the *Discourse*.³⁰ There we find Descartes arguing that what we would nowadays call linguistic competence cannot in the end be a physical matter and thus that physicalism is false. His reasoning is at least broadly similar to the conceivability argument. Can't I conceive, Descartes says, of someone physically identical to me and yet who lacks linguistic competence? And if I can conceive of this, isn't the best explanation that it really is possible and thus that physicalism is false? Indeed, if Descartes were of a slightly different cast of mind, he might also have offered a knowledge argument for the same conclusion. Can't we conceive of someone who knows all the physical truths and yet does not know the linguistic truths? And if we can conceive this, isn't the best explanation that it really is possible and thus that physicalism is false?

Now, what is the best reaction to arguments of this sort? The first thing to say is that from our modern point of view, the conceivability claims that are central to this critique of physicalism seem quite without foundation. It is almost second nature to us that internal information processing is both relevant to linguistic understanding and can assume highly complex computational forms. And, with that notion in place, the idea that it is possible that something physically identical to me but which lacks linguistic competence seems quite unmotivated. Something physically identical to me *would* be identical to me in terms of internal information processing, and, in turn, something identical to me in terms of information processing *would* be identical to me in terms of linguistic competence. In short, if Descartes were to offer his argument against physicalism today, it is difficult to imagine anyone taking it seriously.

But what explains the fact that a conceivability argument which seemed powerful to Descartes seems to us to be not powerful at all? Of course, this is a large question, too

²⁹ The missing concept strategy I am about to outline is obviously very closely related to, and inspired by, related suggestions in Nagel 1986, and McGinn 1990. However, I think the present view is different *enough* from those positions to warrant separate attention. As regards McGinn, there is no commitment to the idea that we are cognitively closed with respect to the solution. As regards Nagel, there is no commitment to the form of property dualism or dual aspect theory that I take to be central to Nagel's view. For a further defence of the strategy in slightly different terminology see, Stoljar in press.

³⁰ The crucial passage is: "...we can certainly conceive of a machine so constructed that it utters words, and even utters words which correspond to our bodily actions causing a change in its organs (e.g. if you touch it in one spot, it asks what you want of it, if you touch it in another it cries out that you are hurting it, and so on). But it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence, as the dullest of men can do." (Descartes 1988, p. 44). In the last sentence of this passage, Descartes says that it is 'not conceivable that a machine should give an appropriately meaningful answer'. I take this to mean that it is inconceivable that a (mere) machine however complicated should speak a language, which means that strictly speaking Descartes' argument in this passage is an inconceivability argument rather than a conceivability argument. But I take it that the points made in the texts will apply even so; for defense, see Stoljar in Press.

large to be adequately dealt with in what remains of this paper. But a reasonable hypothesis is that Descartes was operating with what is from our point of view a rather impoverished conception of the physical world. In particular, he did not have access to the ideas of information processing and computational complexity which apply to the physical world, even if in a certain sense they are not part of physics. Without those notions, it is unsurprising that there appears to be an element of contingency in the relation between the physical, on the one hand, and linguistic understanding on the other. But with those notions, this appearance of contingency disappears.³¹

At this point, however, we are in a position to say what the main idea of the missing concept strategy is. The main idea is that our contemporary position with respect to experience is parallel to Descartes' position with respect to language. In both cases we have a series of conceivability claims. In both cases we are faced with a line of reasoning from these claims to the falsity of physicalism. And in both cases we have a number of potential suggestions about what to say about this line of reasoning. One possibility is to say that the physicalism is false. Another possibility is to say that the reasoning goes wrong because it neglects the differences between psychological and physical concepts. A third possibility, however, is to say that the reasoning goes wrong because the conceivability claims on which it is based are generated by a conception of the physical world from which crucial concepts are missing. With the great advantage of hindsight, it is plausible that this is the correct thing to say about Descartes' argument about language. The suggestion of the missing concept strategy is that this is also the correct thing to say about the contemporary debates about experience.

Of course this suggestion raises a host of further questions that I cannot pursue here. How is the hypothesis that we are missing some concepts supposed to defeat the conceivability argument exactly? What sorts of considerations could one advance in favor of the hypothesis in the first place? And is the Cartesian argument about language *really* analogous to the contemporary arguments concerning experience? My own view

³¹ An interesting question is how similar the Cartesian Argument is to a well-known contemporary argument about language, namely the Kripkenstein Argument presented in Kripke 1982. There are clearly a number of points of similarity and difference here, but perhaps the main thing for our purposes is that the Cartesian Argument seeks to undermine a supervenience thesis by insisting that there is an element of contingency in the relation between linguistic competence and the physical. In this respect the Cartesian Argument is very similar to the conceivability argument I have been discussing. However, I understand it, the Kripkenstein argument, does not seek to undermining the supervenience of (in this case) the semantic on the non-semantic by insisting that the relation between the two is contingent. Rather it seeks to undermine the supervenience of the semantic on the non-semantic by insisting that, given our ordinary conception of meaning, we must be able to "read off" (Kripke 1982, p. 26) the semantic facts from their non-semantic facts on which they supervene. In my view, the contemporary argument to which Descartes' argument is most similar is not the Kripkenstein argument, but the Blockhead argument against behaviorism (cf. Block 1981). According to Cottingham (1992), for example, Descartes' argument "starts from the observation that a machine, or a *bête machine*, is essentially a stimulus and response device" (p.247) and combines this with the further observation that "the human language-user has the capacity of respond appropriately to an indefinite range of situations, and this capacity seems *toto caelo* different from anything that could be generated by a look-up tree...correlating inputs and outputs" (p. 248). It should be clear that this sort of language is extremely suggestive of the Blockhead argument. For further discussion of this point, and the missing concept view in general, see Stoljar 2001 and in press.

is that questions of this kind can be answered (cf. Stoljar in press), but I will not be able to answer them here. The main point has been to combat the suspicion that the only option for physicalists is to appeal to the phenomenal concept strategy in order to answer the conceivability argument and the knowledge argument. There are certainly other options, and if my arguments have been right in this paper, those options should be taken.

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