

Lewis On Revelation

Daniel Stoljar, ANU

Workshop on Revelation and Humility, ANU, November 18, 2005

1. The Basic Idea

The basic idea of revelation is the idea that having an experience puts you in a remarkable epistemic position with respect to the experience: you know, or are in a position to know, every essential property of it, and in this sense know its essence or nature; the only things left to learn about it are its nonessential or accidental properties.

- (1) If S has an experience of type E, S knows, or is in position to know, every essential property of E. (= *Revelation*, at least provisionally)
- (2) If S has a diamond in his pocket, S knows, or is in a position to know, every essential property of diamonds.
- (3) If S has an experience as of color C, S knows, or is in a position to know, every essential property of C.

2. Revelation and Other Epistemic Principles

To endorse revelation is to endorse *one* principle about the relation between having an experience and knowing, or having (justified) belief about, the experience in question. But there are umpteen principles in this vicinity.

Self-presentation.

- (4) If S has an experience of type E, S knows, or is in a position to know, that S has an experience of type E

Self-intimation:

- (5) If S has an experience of type E, S believes that S has an experience of type E.

Understanding:

- (6) If S has an experience of type E, S understands what E is (knows what E is, has the (or a) concept of E).

These principles are distinct from revelation (and from each other).

3. Varieties of Revelation

The basic idea of revelation can be interpreted in different ways. Here are five ways (there might be others):

- (i) Knowing versus being in a position to know.
- (ii) Knowledge that E is F, where F is *in fact* essential versus knowledge that E is essentially F.
- (iii) 'Every essential property' might mean *every necessary property* or it might mean *every essential but not merely necessary property*.
- (iv) In one way of thinking, an essential property of E is a property E has in all worlds at which E exists or is instantiated—but in all worlds considered as actual or as counterfactual? (Mnemonic: on the first way of thinking, the

- essence of water is the property of *playing the water role*; on the second way, the essence of water is *being H₂O*.)
- (v) Revelation construed as a thesis about experience versus revelation construed as a thesis about understanding.

4. Revelation and the Part-Whole Relation

Lewis: “maybe revelation is true in other cases—as it might be for the part-whole relation” (1997, p.353, n.21).

This is unexpected. What is going on? Answer: there are two theses doing business under the name ‘revelation’:

- (1) If S *has* an experience of type E, S knows, or is in position to know, every essential property of E.
- (7) If S *understands* what an experience of E is, S knows, or is in position to know, every essential property of E.

But (1) and (7) are different. Moreover, (7) is an instance of something general:

- (8) If S understands what X is, S knows, or is in a position to know, every essential property of X.

This thesis could be true of part and whole and of experiences.

5. Revelation Identified

The thing to notice is this: (6) when conjoined with (7) yields (1):

- (6) If S has an experience of type E, S understands what an experience of type E is (knows what E is, has the (or a) concept of E).
- (7) If S understands what an experience of type E is, S knows, or is in position to know, every essential property of E.
- (1) If S has an experience of type E, S knows, or is in position to know, every essential property of E.

This suggests the following analysis of the situation: (8) is the general thesis of revelation; (7) is the general thesis applied to experiences; and (1) is a derived thesis got by combining the general thesis applied to experience with *an altogether separate* thesis about understanding. To put it differently: (1) may be factored into (6) and (7).

6. Revelation against Physicalism (And Nearly Everything Else)

- (9) If Jones has an experience of type E, then for every essential truth T about E, Jones knows or is in a position to know, T.
- (10) Jones has an experience of type E.
- (11) The following is one essential truth about E: there is a physical condition of type C such that C entails E.

- (12) Jones does not know, and is not in a position to know, that there is a physical condition of type *C* such that *C* entails *E*.

These are inconsistent: If (9) and (10) are true, Jones knows every essential truth about *E*. But if (11) and (12) are true, Jones does *not* know every essential truth about *E*, i.e. because he does not know at least one essential truth, namely the truth that physical condition *C* is metaphysically sufficient for *E*. If (9-12) are inconsistent, one of them is false. Setting aside the stipulated (12), the only options left are to deny (9), (10) or (11).

The argument against physicalism says that (9) and (10) are true, and so (11) is false. (Notice that the argument could be replicated against more or less any theory short of the most uncompromising primitivism. That is the respect in which revelation is opposed to practically everything.)

7. Revelation and Folk Psychology

Transposing what he says into our framework, Lewis's (1995) response to the argument alleges an equivocation on 'experience'. Operating with the *target conception* of experience, (9), (11) and (12) are true, (10) is false. Operating with a *replacement* conception of experience, (10), (11) and (12) are true, (9) is false. (This terminology is mine, not Lewis's.)

The distinctive aspect of Lewis's position is the idea that the target conception is built into folk psychology; that is, that revelation is part of the ordinary notion of experience:

Lewis: "Folk psychology says, I think, that we *identify* the qualia of our experiences. We know exactly what they are—and that in an uncommonly demanding and literal sense of 'knowing what'. If I have an experience with quale Q, I know that I am having an experience with quale Q and will afterwards remember (unless I happen to forget) that on that occasion I had an experience with quale Q.... I spoke of an uncommonly demanding and literal sense of 'knowing what.' Let me elaborate. I say that according to the Identification Thesis, the knowledge I gain by having an experience with quale Q enables me to know what Q is—identifies Q—in this sense: any possibility not ruled out by the content of my knowledge is one in which it is Q, and not any other property instead, that is the quale of my experience. Equivalently, when I have an experience with quale Q, the knowledge I thereby gain reveals the essence of Q: a property of Q such that, necessarily, Q has it and nothing else does. If for instance, Q is essentially the physical property of being an event of C-firing, and I identify the qualia of my experience in the appropriate 'demanding and literal' sense, I come to know that what is going on in me is an event of C-firing. Contrapositively: if I identify the quale of my experience in the appropriate sense, and yet know nothing of the firing of my neurons, then the quale of my experience cannot have been essentially the property of being an event of C-firing" (1995, p. 327-8.)

However, even if revelation is true, we should be skeptical of its being built into folk psychology:

- (i) There are umpteen principles about the relation of experience and knowledge of experience—why assume revelation is the relevant one? Maybe folk psychology says that understanding is true, not revelation.

- (ii) Folk psychology says that your average goat feels pain, but does it say too that your average goat is a *potential metaphysician* of pain? (Perhaps know/is in a position to know might come to the rescue here.)
- (iii) Speaking of solutions to a problem about color which appeal to revelation, Lewis says, “We materialists must dismiss this ‘solution’ as a useless piece of wishful thinking” (1997, p. 353.) So while Lewis says revelation is part of folk psychology in 1995, his language at least suggests something different in other papers.

8. Revelation and Obviousness

Lewis: “Why do I think it must be part of the folk theory of qualia? Because so many philosophers find it so very obvious. I think it seems obvious because it is built into folk psychology. Others will think it gets built into folk psychology because it is so obvious; but either way, the obviousness and the folk psychological status go together.” (1995, p. 328.)

As against this, even if revelation is true, we should be skeptical of its alleged obviousness:

- (i) Maybe it is obvious that having an experience puts one in some sort of epistemic position with respect to the experience, but why the sort specified by revelation?
- (ii) Thinking of folk psychology as a system of platitudes, as Lewis once did, makes it plausible that obviousness and folk psychology goes together. But thinking of folk psychology as like tacit knowledge of language makes it less likely.
- (iii) You’d think that any principle about essence is not going to be obvious.

9. Revelation and Kripke

Lewis: “...Saul Kripke seems to be relying on [revelation] when he writes that ‘pain is picked out by its immediate phenomenological quality’ and concludes that ‘pain’ can be rigid designator although it is not introduced by rigidifying any actual description of pain” (1995, p.328, n.3.)

Lewis seems to intend this as evidence that philosophers finding revelation obvious. But, even if revelation is true, we should be skeptical of the idea that Kripke is relying on it:

- (i) Kripke is not even explicitly talking about understanding is in these passages. So it is a bit difficult to see him as relying on revelation, which is a thesis about understanding.
- (ii) Even if you developed what he said so that it is an account of understanding (which I agree you could) you don’t end up with revelation. What you end up with is the thesis that understanding pain involves a *de re* or demonstrative element, in a way that understanding heat does or need not.
- (13) If S understands what pain is, S knows that pain is *this* experience (where the demonstrative in question picks out pain.)

- (14) If S understands what heat is, S knows that heat is the cause of heat sensations

But (13) is *not* an instance of revelation.

Lewis: "...there is no reason to deny that the broad, de re content of my knowledge does in the strongest sense identify qualia. Hitherto, I have been denying that the narrow de se and de dicto content of my knowledge identifies the qualia. But the broad content is constituted partly by my narrow de se self-ascriptions involving acquaintance, partly by the identity of the objects of acquaintance. Thus I may know de re of Fred that he is a burgler, without in any sense identifying Fred. Likewise, I may know de re of a certain physical property that it is among the qualia of my experience, without identifying the property in question." (1995, 329-30),

As I understand Kripke, he is saying that when we know what pain is, we have a certain sort of de re knowledge. But then he is not relying on revelation.

10. Revelation and Conceivability

Here is an interesting hypothesis suggested by some of what has gone before: the target conception of experience—i.e., the one that includes revelation—is in operation in the conceivability argument (CA) against materialism. If that is so, Lewis's discussion of revelation has a straightforward application to the CA; in particular, we might reject CA by rejecting revelation.

As against this, I think we should be skeptical of its being built in.

- (i) If this was what was wrong with CA we would likewise have to reject the perfect actor argument against behaviorism—but that is a fine argument.
- (ii) Kripke defends the plausibility of CA, but he is not relying on revelation (as we have just seen).

11. Conclusions

Conclusion #1: Revelation is best seen as a principle about what happens when you *understand* (e.g) experiences as opposed to what happens when you *have* experiences.

Conclusion #2: We are free to reject the argument from revelation as being driven by a conception of experience that we have no reason to endorse: Pain may be different from heat but that does not make it similar to the part-whole relation:

Conclusion #3: Rejecting revelation does not put us in a better position with respect to the conceivability argument, since that argument does not rely on revelation. If CA is wrong, it must be wrong for some other reason.

