Property Dualists Needn't Be Panpsychists

In his stimulating and insightful paper, "Property Dualists Should Be Panpsychists", Phillip Goff argues that Property Dualists must deny that the concept Consciousness is vague, and this commits them to Panpsychism. Phillip's argument has three premises, the first and third of which conditional on the assumption that Property Dualism is true:

1) If Consciousness is vague, then the semantic facts that undergird this vagueness (the association of Consciousness with a "spectrum of sharpenings") must be *a priori* available to anyone in possession of the concept.
2) No such spectrum of sharpenings is *a priori* available to any of us
3) If Consciousness is not vague, then Panpsychism is true.

I am in sympathy with Phillip (and with Michael Antony[1]) on a very central point: there are good reasons for doubting that consciousness is vague, and if consciousness is not vague, there will be a metaphysical reckoning. What follows is a family dispute. But I worry that Phillip's argument is in serious trouble as it stands. In this note, I will consider three problem areas, one for each premise:

Ad 1) Phillip argues that it is only because of a special feature of consciousness that if it is vague, its sharpenings must be *a priori* available to us. He argues that a certain principle, PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY, is equivalent to the claim that Property Dualism is correct, and he argues that PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY implies 1). I'll be arguing that this approach is misguided. PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY is a much more powerful claim than the claim that Property Dualism is true, and it is possible to be a Dualist for standard reasons, without committing oneself to PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY. I'll also argue that PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY does not commit us to anything in the vicinity of 1). The general theme will be that if some principle like 1) is true, it had better flow from general considerations about the nature of vagueness, rather than special considerations about the meaning of consciousness.

Ad 2) It is not clear what a spectrum of sharpenings is, exactly. But once we step back and look at the spirit of premise 2) in more theory-neutral terms, the gaps in Phillip's defense of it come into view.

Ad 3) Phillip makes two claims in support of premise 3): first, Non-Panpsychist Property Dualism involves more brute, ontologically dangling facts than Panpsychist Property Dualism does. Second, the only thing to recommend Non-Panpsychist Property Dualism over Panpsychism is common sense – but common sense really has no place in this debate. Here, I will express skepticism about the first claim, and argue, against the second, that there are reasons beyond common sense to reject Panpsychism.

[1] Antony (2006), (2008)

(I) **PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY**

Phillip's argument for 1) hinges on a principle he calls:

(PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY) It is *a priori* for someone possessing the concept Consciousness, in virtue of possessing that concept, what it is for something to be conscious. (Goff 4)

Phillip claims that Property Dualists should accept PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY, and that PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY implies 1).

What does Phillip mean by "it is *a priori* what it is for something to be conscious"? He offers us two glosses. The first is that a transparent concept reveals the nature of the property it denotes, the second is that a transparent concept reveals what is ascribed in an application of the concept (*ibid*.).

It is worrying that these glosses do not take vagueness into account. If the transparent concept is a *vague* concept, then (modulo Epistemicism) there is no single precise property whose nature it could be in a position to reveal. We have a choice of possible refinements: a Somewhat Transparent Concept will reveal everything that is determinately true about the nature of what it denotes (or equivalently, it will reveal everything that is determinately ascribed in an application of that concept), a Totally Transparent Concept will reveal everything that is either determinately true about the nature of what it denotes, or is indeterminate about the nature of what it denotes. Do we endorse SOME PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY or TOTAL PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY? I see no reason to endorse the latter over the former. I will return to this point after considering Phillip's claims about the dialectical significance of PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY.

Phillip makes strong claims about the dialectical role of PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY in the standard Kripke-Jackson-Chalmers line of argument for Property Dualism. He claims both that PHENOMENAL TRANSPARENCY (hereafter: TRANSPARENCY) implies Dualism, and also that if you go in for the standard line of argument for Dualism, then you are committed to TRANSPARENCY.

Both claims are problematic. The first is true, strictly speaking: if everything about the nature of consciousness is revealed by my concept of it, and my concept does not reveal that consciousness is material, then consciousness is not material. Therefore, Dualism is true.

But there is a catch. If Dualism is not itself true *a priori* then TRANSPARENCY must be false – for if I cannot know *a priori* that Dualism is true, then there is an essential fact about consciousness – its non-identity with anything material – that is not knowable *a priori* (let alone knowable in virtue of possession of the concept Consciousness alone). So if TRANSPARENCY is not *a priori*, then either it is false, or there is some other argument for dualism that IS *a priori*, in which case the argument from

TRANSPARENCY is an idle wheel.[2] And as will become clear, I do not see any good reason to think TRANSPARENCY is true *a priori*, at least not if we mean *a priori* in the conclusive sense that sits most happily with talk of revelation of natures.[3]

What of the claim that if you go in for the standard line of argument for Dualism, you are committed to TRANSPARENCY? Certainly none of Kripke, Jackson or Chalmers make any explicit appeal to this principle. The more interesting question is whether their arguments have this principle or something like it as a consequence. Let's consider a simplified version of Chalmers' Conceivability argument:

1) I can conceive of a possible world that seems a lot like a zombie world.
2) If I can conceive of a possible world that seems a lot like Φ, then there is a possible world that seems a lot like Φ.
3) Therefore, there is a possible world that seems a lot like a zombie world.
4) But a possible world cannot seem a lot like a zombie world without *being* a zombie world.
5) Therefore, there is a possible zombie world.

My first observation is that, even if we take this argument to be sound, we need not take all of its premises to be *a priori*. There is a solid case for the *a priority of* 1) and 4), but what about 2), the principle linking up epistemic scenarios with metaphysically possible worlds? Chalmers, to be sure, takes this principle to be *a priori*, but one might be persuaded of the soundness of his master argument, and hence Property Dualism, without agreeing with him here. Such a Property Dualist will want to deny TRANSPARENCY, because such a dualist will take dualism to be true *a posteriori*.

But even if we take every step of Chalmers' argument to be *a priori* justified, there are still good reasons to resist TRANSPARENCY. If every step of Chalmers' argument is *a priori*, then it is *a priori* that Dualism is true, and so it is *a priori* that consciousness is not physical, or functional, or chemical.[4] But this leaves us a long way off from the powerful claim that every single essential fact about consciousness is *a priori*.

Some questions about the nature of consciousness may not be settled by any amount of purely *a priori* reflection, even if Chalmers' argument is *a priori* . For example, is Consciousness a relation or an adverbial modification? If it is a relation, what

---

[2] TRANSPARENCY may actually imply its own *a priority*, which makes the present point even more powerful. For surely if TRANSPARENCY is true then it reflects an essential fact about consciousness. It follows from TRANSPARENCY that TRANSPARENCY should be *a priori* for anyone possessing the concept consciousness. Thanks to Colin Marshall for this point.

[3] Note the important difference between Phillip's TRANSPARENCY thesis, and the similar principles at play in Johnston (1992), Lewis (1995), Byrne and Hilbert (2004) and Stoljar (2006) usually called REVELATION principles. Those principles tell you that a token experience puts you in a position to know all of the essential truths about either it or its perceptual object. These theses are about something like perceptual content and perceptual justification, not about concept mastery bestowing *a priori* justification.

[4] Whether these facts are disclosed *by the concept* itself is a trickier matter: if 2) is true *a priori*, this won't have much to do with the concept consciousness in particular. But this is a quibble.

is it a relation to, and what relation is it exactly? It seems to be an empirical fact that consciousness is not a non-disjunctive direct awareness relation to mind-independent particulars, and it may be an empirical fact that consciousness is not a special sort of higher order thinking.[5] The question of whether the Chalmers argument might settle these questions *a priori,* is the question of whether the appropriate analogues of principles 1) and 4) of the Chalmers argument would be true: can something *seem* like a world where consciousness is a relation, without *being* a world where consciousness is a relation? For the record, I don't see why not.

And what about aspects of consciousness that somehow transcend our capacities of conceptual comprehension? Perhaps consciousness has a noumenal essence as well as a phenomenal presentation, and our concepts of consciousness disclose its phenomenal presentation, leaving its true noumenal essence opaque. This Kantian possibility seems to be consistent with every premise of the Chalmersian argument above.

So there seem to be a variety of reasons for accepting Dualism on the basis of standard arguments without thereby accepting TRANSPARENCY. But TRANSPARENCY was only a means to an end. We want to know, after all, whether it is true that if consciousness is vague, then we know *a priori* how to associate it with a spectrum of sharpenings. So there are two remaining questions for us: can we get here directly from the premises of a Kripke-Jackson-Chalmers style argument, and can we get here from TRANSPARENCY, irrespective of its dialectical relation to Dualism?

My answer in both cases shall be no. The Kripke and Jackson arguments make no official use of *any* features of the general concept of consciousness: Kripke talks about pain and Jackson talks about phenomenal red. We might have no general conception of what it is that these things have in common, yet still consider worlds in which they are present or absent. And Chalmers' appeal to zombies is merely illustrative: he could instead speak of any scenario in which the physical facts are the same, but some facts, say facts about phenomenal redness or facts about pain, are slightly different. Since these arguments could convince one of dualism on a piecemeal basis, without ever appealing to the general concept of consciousness, it is doubtful that these arguments imply that we must have knowledge of the intricacies of the semantics of that general concept.

What about TRANSPARENCY? I sketched this point already. If consciousness is vague, then there is no single precise property whose nature it could be in a position to reveal. We need to refine the TRANSPARENCY thesis. One plausible refinement would be SOME TRANSPARENCY: if consciousness is vague, then it reveals every fact that is determinately true about consciousness. Another refinement would be TOTAL TRANSPARENCY: if consciousness is vague, then it reveals everything that is either determinately true, or indeterminate, about the nature of consciousness. But this latter formula is unhappy. What is it to reveal something that is indeterminate? We could say instead that it reveals, of every determinate truth, *that* it is a determinate truth, and of every indeterminacy *that* it is an indeterminacy. But this is a lot to reveal – at this point

[5] See Miguel Sebastian's paper, this conference, and Block, (2011)

we might as well just help ourselves to Phillip's premise 1). We might instead locate the indeterminacy in the revelation itself: perhaps consciousness *indeterminately reveals* those things that are indeterminate about the nature of consciousness. But what is it to indeterminately reveal something?

We face a choice of different refinements, and the most cogent one of them, SOME TRANSPARENCY, clearly will not imply much about our *a priori* access to spectra of sharpenings (whatever those are, exactly). Even if one were on the market for some thesis in the vicinity of TRANSPARENCY, why would one be tempted to buy the stronger and more obscure TOTAL TRANSPARENCY, rather than the weaker and more straightforward SOME TRANSPARENCY?

--

Phillip wants to remain neutral about whether there is a general requirement, perhaps constitutive of what vagueness is, to the effect that mastery of a vague concept gives you some special sort of insight into the extent and nature of that concept's vagueness. Phillip wants instead to extract the instance of that claim specifically about consciousness from special features of that special concept that you will only believe in if you are a special kind of dualist. The lesson of the foregoing is that this strategy is not going to work.[6]

Personally, I take this to be good news: it shows that if we have an argument for the non-vagueness of consciousness, it will be a general argument, targeting materialists and dualists alike.

(II) CONCEPT MASTERY[7] AND VAGUENESS

The sort of argument I have in mind looks something like this:

1') Mastery of a vague concept gives you insight into the extent and nature of that concept's vagueness (perhaps conditional on mastery of other, suitably related concepts).

2') In the case of the concept consciousness, there is no such insight.

---

[6] Here is a gesture at a general argument for this claim. What is it that you know, when you know that something is a sharpening of a vague concept? Is this knowledge of a certain cognitively significant relationship between concepts? If so then, assuming as we are that such things yield *a priori* knowledge, it looks like mastery of vague concepts, together with mastery of sharpening concepts, should already yield *a priori* knowledge of their relationship. On the other hand, say that being a sharpening is not a cognitively significant connection but instead the relationship runs along direct referential lines. Then it is dubious that knowledge of the relationship should be *a priori*, even in the case of concepts that seem to tell us a lot about the natures of their objects. Thanks to Ted Sider for pointing me in the general direction of this thought.

[7] I say 'Mastery' rather than 'Possession' because you might think that Possession comes cheap: the blind can possess color concepts, perhaps, by deference. It should be emphasized that the notion of conceptual understanding we make use of here is quite substantive. (For an argument that makes sustained use of this distinction, see Rabin (2010))

Such an argument is general – a defense of premise 1') must flow from general considerations about the nature of vagueness, rather than specific ones about the meaning of consciousness. Also, we can appreciate the structure of the argument without committing to the specifics of a supervaluational approach to vagueness, according to which there are such things as sharpenings that travel in spectra.

Indeed, we can appreciate not just the structure of the argument, but its appeal, at least to those of us who reject Analytic Materialsm: Consciousness may come in degrees of intensity, but it is always either some non-zero degree, or it isn't. We have no notion of how something could be *between* zero and a non-zero degree, and this means consciousness isn't vague.

In this section, I'll briefly enumerate some challenges that confront a champion of 2'). These challenges also affect Phillip's more specific claim, that we do not have *a priori* knowledge of how to associate consciousness with a spectrum of sharpenings – but they are not challenges to the specific details of that proposal.

First Challenge: Unexplored options. Since the dawn of time, philosophers have sought the fundamental Principle of the universe. It is Water to Thales. Fire, according to Heraclitus and Zoroaster. Air to Anaximenes, the Indefinite to Anaximander, Number to Pythagoras, the Good to Plato. The Persian mystic Suhrawardi tells us that everything is Light. Spinoza teaches that we are all expressions of God's essence. To Schopenhauer, everything is Will. Hegel thinks it is Geist, and Materialists think it is Matter…[8]

Each of these views offers us some conception of the universe in which consciousness is constructed from something else. And if consciousness is constructed from something else, then the line between fully constructed instances of consciousness, and not quite constructed instances, may be a blurry one.

Any of these views might be true without being true *a priori*, but also, any of these views might turn out to be true *a priori*. It is no argument here to say we do not currently appreciate how the *a priori* reduction might go. For one thing, many of the thinkers I list *do* think they see how the reduction goes, and they are honourable men. To be sure, since we are talking here about necessary, *a priori* connections, it is difficult to assess the onus of proof. But imagine the metaphysicians of 1750 debating about the vagueness of the concept life. Who then could have predicted the acquisition of concepts like RNA, virus, etc, in virtue of which we today understand the vagueness of life?[9] In the case of Matter, Phillip appreciates the point: he takes CONCEPTUAL DUALISM – the claim that there is no *a priori* reduction of consciousness to the material – as a premise. But it looks like the premise we really need is something like CONCEPTUAL VERY MANYISM, and that is a taller order.[10]

Second Challenge: *Tu Quoque*. I have a very scant conception of what it is like to be a bat, even less, of what it is like to be a bat dropping. Yet presumably, if Phillip's

[8] The Protophenomenal does not get its own category here, since this is not so much a Principle as a schema for a Principle: None of the Above.

[9] Antony (2008) has a more sustained discussion of this example.

[10] Thanks to Dave Chalmers for helping me appreciate this point.

version of Panpsychism is correct, it is in some broad sense possible that there be concepts for this, even if we actual humans cannot seem to find them. Why should it be any different with whatever concepts we claim might afford the right sort of reduction of consciousness, locating it as a fuzzy region in some quality space?

Third Challenge: Metaphysical vagueness. If there is metaphysical vagueness, then presumably it provides us with some wholesale way of making sense of what the vagueness of a concept really amounts to. I do not have any independent grip on what it could be for Schroedinger's cat to be sort of dead, lying on the floor and sort of alive, jumping on the table. On one of its construals, anyway, the metaphysical theory of vagueness gives us a wholesale insight into the nature of vagueness, telling us everything there is to know about how the world is in a situation like this.

Fourth Challenge: Trivialities and Tricks. If conceptual capacities are suitably combinatorial, then I can combine my concept sort of with my concept conscious, and get sort of conscious. I can combine my concept 28% with consciousness and get 28% conscious. The defender of 2') must say why concepts like this do not suffice to give us all of the insight we might ask for.[11]

(III) FROM PRECISION TO PANPSYCHISM

I doubt that the non-vagueness of consciousness, even taken together with Property Dualism, implies Panpsychism. Phillip holds that the Non-Panpsychist Dualist must embrace Implausible Consequences, in the form of arbitrary precise cut-off points, that the Panpsychist need not embrace. Phillip owes us more of an argument that Non-Panpsychism is at any disadvantage here. The Property Dualist posits that there are very exact facts about the distribution of consciousness in the physical universe – facts that could have been ever so slightly different. But the (Dualist) Panpsychist must also posit very exact facts about the distribution of consciousness that could have been ever so slightly different. Neither view brings us very close to the Leibnizian ideal. There is even a respect in which Panpsychism may be worse off: in addition to the exact, conceivably different facts about the distribution of consciousness in the physical universe, Panpsychists have the Combination problem to deal with: how do we account for the exact relation between the consciousness of my parts, and the consciousness of me? The answer will not obviously be supported by sufficient reason.

I'd like to close with a comment on Phillip's suggestion that the only thing Non-Panpsychist Property Dualism has over Panpsychism is common sense. Phillip claims that common sense should not figure in our resolution of this debate. I am not sure about that, though I am willing to admit that my own compass of common sense scrambles

[11] Miguel Sebastian (forthcoming) deserves credit for a particularly good example here: why does not the concept Being Indeterminate as to whether you are experiencing the determinate shade Red27, or nothing at all give us insight into what the vagueness of consciousness might amount to?

when I get close enough to Property Dualism. But considerations other than common sense tell against Panpsychism here. Here is one of them.

There is readily available evidence that diminishing brain function diminishes conscious experience. Destroy the visual processing areas in my brain, and I will cease (or almost cease) to have color experiences. It is not simply that my consciousness *changes* when my brain changes, but that my consciousness diminishes when my brain is damaged. It is certainly *consistent* with this mundane evidence that there be some baseline of consciousness that no amount of brain damage can take away, but it does not seem unreasonable to take the evidence to tell against that hypothesis. It is also questionable that Phillip can appeal to a threshold here: won't it be Implausibly arbitrary where exactly the threshold is located? Another option is to say that *Human* consciousness, or anyway *Our Kind* of consciousness, diminishes with brain damage, while other kinds do not. But this just raises the question: what sort of relation is there between our kind of consciousness and the other kinds – and won't the threshold between the kinds be Implausibly arbitrary?[12]

REFERENCES

Antony, M. (2008) "Are our concepts **Conscious State** and **Conscious Creature** vague?" *Erkenntnis,* 68
-- (2006) "Vagueness and the Metaphysics of Consciousness" *Philosophical Studies* 128
Block, N. (2011) "The Higher Order Approach to Consciousness is Defunct", *Analysis*, V. 71, N. 3
Chalmers, D. (2009) "The Two Dimensionalist Argument Against Materialism", *Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Mind*, OUP
Goff, P. (2011), "Property Dualists Should Be Panpsychists". 3rd Online Consciousness Conference, http://consciousnessonline.wordpress.com/
Hilbert, D and Byrne, A., (2004) "Color Primitivism"
Jackson, F. (1982) "Epiphenomenal Qualia" *Philosophical Quarterly*
Johnston, M. (1992), "How To Speak of the Colors" *Phil Studies* 68
Kripke, S. (1980), *Naming and Necessity,* Harvard University Press
Lewis, D. (1995), "Should A Materialist Believe in Qualia", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*
Rabin, G. (2011), "Conceptual Mastery and the Knowledge Argument", *Philosophical Studies*
Sebastian, M. (2011), "Not a Hot Dream", 3rd Online Consciousness Conference, http://consciousnessonline.wordpress.com/
-- (forthcoming), "Phenomenal Characters and Vagueness"
Stoljar, D. (2006), "The Argument From Revelation", *Naturalism and Analysis*, MIT Press.

[12] My thanks to Colin Marshall and Jeff Sebo for comments on an earlier version of this paper.