

Subject specific vocabulary: Metaphysics of mind

The following subject specific vocabulary provides definitions of key Metaphysics of Mind terms used in our A-level Philosophy (7172) specification.

Your students should be familiar with, and gain understanding from all these terms and arguments.

Ability knowledge

Knowledge of how to do something: the ability to perform some physical and/or mental activity (e.g. knowing how to drive or do mental arithmetic).

Ability knowledge (response to the ‘knowledge/Mary’ argument)

An objection to Jackson’s ‘knowledge/Mary argument’ for property dualism (and against reductive physicalism). Jackson argues that Mary – a scientist specialising in the neurophysiology of colour, despite living in a black and white environment - knows all the physical facts (all the information science could ever teach us) about colours and colour vision. But she learns something new when she sees colour for the first time (e.g. the redness of the tomato): a fact or property (i.e. qualia) that is non-physical.

The ability knowledge response agrees with Jackson that Mary learns something new, but rejects the claim that what she acquires is propositional knowledge (‘knowledge that’) of anything non-physical. When Mary sees colour for the first time, she has learned how to do certain things: she has (among other things) acquired the ability to identify, discriminate between, and remember colours. Acquiring ability knowledge (‘know how’) is consistent with physicalism, and so the ‘knowledge/Mary’ argument for property dualism fails.

Actual world

The world (as in the totality of existence) as it really is. This world is often contrasted with worlds that are merely possible (logically or metaphysically): e.g. in the actual world Mount Everest is the highest mountain above sea level on planet Earth, but there is a possible world in which Everest is only the third highest mountain.

Analogy

A comparison drawn between one thing (or set of things) and another thing (or set of things), whereby similarities are identified for the purposes of clarification or explanation (e.g. the comparison of human life with a narrative or journey: all can be broken into temporal phases – with a beginning, a middle, and an end – and are characterised by the goals of the agents involved etc).

Analogy (argument from/responding to issues for dualism)

A first-person response to the 'problem of other minds' facing dualism. I am certain that I have a mind, and my mental states are causally connected to my behavioural states. The behavioural states of others are similar to my own when subject to similar stimulus, and so by analogy I infer that they too have minds (e.g. at sporting contests or musical performances I manifest my mental states of enjoyment and appreciation by clapping and cheering; when I see others clapping and cheering at the same events, I infer they too have mental states such as enjoyment or appreciation). One intuition underpinning the argument is the notion that 'like effects have like causes.'

Asymmetry

A lack of balance, equality or equivalence in some state of affairs.

Asymmetry (issues for behaviourism)

An objection to behaviourist claims that language about mental states can be reduced (without loss of meaning) to language about behaviour or behavioural dispositions. The objection questions how having a mental state could just consist of being in a behavioural state or having a behavioural disposition when we have introspective access to our own mental states, and this first-person knowledge seems direct and certain, whereas our third-person knowledge of other people's mental states based on their behaviour is indirect, inferred, and fallible. Although especially associated with behaviourism, this asymmetry can be raised as an issue for other physicalist theories of mind.

Behaviourism (hard)

The view (associated with Hempel) that all propositions about mental states can be reduced without loss of meaning (i.e. analytically reduced) to propositions that exclusively use the language of physics to talk about bodily states (movements or behaviours).

Behaviourism (soft)

The view (associated with Ryle) that propositions about mental states are (or can be translated/reduced to) propositions about behavioural dispositions that use ordinary language.

Behaviourism (philosophical)

A family of (physicalist) theories claiming that language about the mind (or mental states) can be analysed in terms of language about behaviour (and/or behavioural dispositions). Our mental concepts acquire their meaning by virtue of their reference to (or relationship with) behaviour.

Best hypothesis

The thesis which emerges from an inductive (or abductive) approach to a question or problem, whereby a theory (or thesis) is proposed as the most convincing explanation of some empirical evidence from among other possible explanations of the same empirical evidence.

Best hypothesis (responding to issues for dualism)

An inductive (or abductive) response to the 'problem of other minds' facing dualism, which (unlike the argument from analogy) is an objective/third-person response. Of the candidate explanations for the behaviour we observe in human beings (and perhaps non-human animals), the best hypothesis we have to account for that behaviour is the existence of minds in beings other than ourselves. This may be compared with rival hypotheses, such as the thesis that we live in a world containing 'philosophical zombies' who show all the outward signs of being minded beings, through their behaviour, but lack any conscious mental states.

Brain states

Physiological states and processes of the brain (e.g. patterns of neural activity). Some physicalist theories, like mind-brain type identity theory, argue for an ontological reduction of mental states to brain states.

Category mistake

An error that arises when we place concepts or properties in the wrong logical category (e.g. if we were to claim that 'the triangle is bitter', we would be placing a geometric concept in a sensory category to which it does not belong).

Category mistake (Ryle/issues for dualism)

Ryle argued that an error arises when we treat mental states as belonging to 'the mind' as if this were 'a thing' which exists in the same way that physical objects or living bodies exist, albeit constituted by a non-physical thinking substance. This error leads to a 'ghost in the machine' concept of mind.

China thought experiment (issues for functionalism)

Block proposes a hypothetical scenario whereby the population of China, using two-way radios, duplicates the functions of the brain. Block argues that (machine) functionalism is committed to saying such a system would have mental states (e.g. qualia), and if we reject this – for example, because we think it is radically counterintuitive - we should reject machine functionalism.

Circularity (issues for behaviourism)

Philosophical behaviourists face an issue defining mental states in terms of behavioural states due to an alleged circularity in their analysis. The behaviourist attempts to reduce claims about mental states to claims about behaviour or behavioural dispositions, but an exhaustive analysis will always include references to (and therefore come back round to) mental states. It may seem, for example, that 'S believing the ice is thin' can be reduced to 'S being disposed to avoid walking on the ice', assuming of course that 'S does not desire an icy plunge'. But circularity arises if it is then claimed that 'S wanting to avoid an icy plunge' can be reduced to 'S avoiding walking on the ice', assuming of course that 'S believes the ice is thin'. If the behaviourist says this – all relevant conditionals in a complete analysis - then they are mentioning a want (or desire) in their account of a belief, and the same belief in their account of the want (or desire.) This defeats the project of reducing language about mental states, without loss of meaning, to language about behavioural states (or dispositions).

Conceivability (argument for substance dualism)

A deductive argument for the conclusion that minds are not identical to (physical) bodies or parts of (physical) bodies, but are distinct (mental) substances. For Descartes, conceivability entails possibility. It is conceivable that the mind can exist without the body and the body without the mind because he has a 'clear and distinct idea' of their different essential natures: the mind is a thinking thing without extension; the body is an extended thing without thought. Therefore, it is possible that the mind can exist without the body. If it is possible that the mind can exist without the body – if 'God could make it so' - then they must be distinct substances.

Conceivable

Something is conceivable as far as it can be thought of without contradiction or incoherence. It is often associated with logical possibility - some philosophers take the two as synonymous – and contrasted with metaphysical possibility.

Conceptual interaction problem (Elisabeth Princess of Bohemia/issues for dualism)

An objection to interactionist dualism (the position that there is two-way causal interaction between the mind and body). Elisabeth argues, against Descartes' substance dualism, that the mind and body cannot interact in the way he suggested because causation is conceptually constituted by contact between extended (physical) bodies, and Descartes denies that the mind is extended or a (physical) body. If minds are not extended (physical) bodies, they cannot be in contact with or even in proximity to bodies. Therefore, there can be no causal interaction between mind and body.

Disposition (behavioural)

Dispositions refer to how a being (someone or something) would behave or react under certain circumstances: the full range of what a being will do, could do, or is likely to do given some set of (hypothetical) conditions (e.g. coffee tends to dissolve when mixed with water, and babies tend to cry when they are hungry).

Dualism (epiphenomenalist)

A version of dualism – the view that the mind (or mental states) and body (or physical states) are ontologically distinct substances or properties – which holds that mental states have no physical effects. On this view, mental states and events are epiphenomena: causally impotent by-products caused by physical processes. (An epiphenomenalist dualist may hold that while mental states and events cannot causally affect physical states and events, they can causally affect each other.)

Dualism (interactionist)

A version of dualism – the view that the mind (or mental states) and body (or physical states) are ontologically distinct substances or properties – which holds that there is (two way) causal interaction between mental and physical states (substances or properties): mental events affect physical events, and physical events affect mental events (e.g. desires can cause bodily movements, and bodily impacts can cause pain).

Dualism (property)

A version of dualism which claims that while there are only physical substances (e.g. bodies) there are at least some mental properties that are neither reducible to nor supervenient upon physical properties, and are therefore ontologically distinct. (Some property dualists may hold that mental properties do supervene on physical properties in this world, as a matter of contingent fact, but this is not true in all possible worlds.)

Dualism (substance)

A version of dualism in which minds are not identical to bodies or parts of bodies. Minds (or mental states) and bodies (or physical states) constitute distinct substances: they are ontologically independent and bear different properties. For Descartes, the essence of mind is (active) thought (or intellect), while the essence of body is (passive) unthinking extension.

Eliminative materialism

A physicalist theory which holds that some or all common-sense ('folk-psychological') mental states (e.g. intentional states such as 'beliefs') do not exist and our common-sense understanding of them is radically mistaken.

Empirical interaction problem (issues for dualism)

An objection to interactionist dualism, which argues that the dualist claim that the non-physical mind (or mental states) causes changes to the body (or physical states) is contradicted by empirical evidence/scientific theory (e.g. the Newtonian law concerning the conservation of energy).

Folk psychology

The ordinary (common sense) understanding of the mind, which presumes the existence of 'internal' mental states which people use to explain and predict behaviour. According to the eliminative materialist critique, folk psychology is a pre-scientific theory of mind which will be superseded by a mature neuroscience.

Functionalism

The theory that all mental states can be characterised in terms of functional roles which can be multiply realised: the same mental state (e.g. pain) can be instantiated in systems with very different constitutions (e.g. humans, dogs, octopuses, aliens). For a functionalist, to be in a certain mental state is to be in a state that plays a given causal role: causal interactions between environmental inputs, behavioural outputs, and internal states.

Functionalism is usually advanced as a physicalist theory, in which the same mental states may be attributes to physically dissimilar systems (e.g. brains and computers), but it is (logically) compatible with non-physicalist ontologies.

Functional duplicate

Two systems are functional duplicates of each other if their states play the same functional roles: one system is a functional duplicate of another (or functionally isomorphic) if the functional relations are identical (i.e. the causal interactions between environmental inputs, behavioural outputs, and internal states are the same).

Indivisibility argument

An argument (by Descartes) for substance dualism. Because bodies (characterised by extension) are divisible, and minds (characterised by thought) are not divisible, minds cannot be identical with bodies or parts of bodies: they do not have the same essential characteristics. Therefore, mind and body are distinct substances.

Intentional properties (i.e. intentionality)

Features of some (or all) mental states whereby they are 'directed' at (or 'about') something (e.g. the belief that France is a republic is *about* France, and the desire to visit Australia is *directed at* Australia).

Introspectively accessible

Mental states are introspectively accessible when we have direct, first-person awareness of them (a form of 'internal observation').

Introspective self-knowledge (issues for epiphenomenal dualism)

An objection to epiphenomenal dualism which challenges the latter's claim that mental states are causally impotent. Introspective self-knowledge involves direct, first-person access to our own mental states (a form of 'internal observation'), and this offers seemingly indubitable evidence that mental states have causal effects (e.g. it is the phenomenal character of my perception of a rainbow, 'what it is like', which causes me to pause working, go to the window, and look at the sky).

Inverted qualia (issues for functionalism)

A thought experiment designed to challenge functionalism. The qualia of two subjects' mental states ('what it is like' for them to be in those states) are inverted, or systematically different, despite the subjects being functionally indistinguishable (i.e. their states are functionally the same). A typical hypothetical inversion concerns colour perception, whereby the first-person colour spectrums of two individuals are systematically inverted (e.g. when one person sees a banana they see the same colour as the other person sees when they see a ripe tomato and vice versa; and yet both call the banana 'yellow' and the tomato 'red'). Given this (conceivable) difference in qualia between functionally indistinguishable beings, it is argued that functionalism cannot account for all mental states by identifying them with (or reducing them to) functional states.

‘Knowledge/Mary’ argument

A thought experiment by Jackson designed to support property dualism (and therefore object to reductive physicalism). A scientist (Mary) specialises in the neurophysiology of vision, but she has spent her entire life living in a black and white room. She has acquired all the physical information (or facts) about what happens when we see colour (e.g. the redness of a ripe tomato). Jackson asks whether Mary will learn anything new (in terms of facts/propositions) if she leaves the room or otherwise sees colour for the first time. It seems obvious that she will learn something new: about the phenomenal properties (or qualia) of colour vision. This would mean that Mary’s knowledge was previously incomplete, and so reductive physicalism is false: there were non-physical properties of mental states to be discovered beyond the reach of the physical sciences.

Logically possible

Something (e.g. a claim or some imaginary scenario) is logically possible if it can be thought of without contradiction or incoherence (e.g. a world where the chemical formula for water is something other than H₂O).

Mental states

Psychological states (e.g. cognitive, perceptual, affective, memory). Philosophers often define mental states in terms of their phenomenal and/or intentional properties.

Mental properties

The characteristic features or attributes of the mind such as qualia (or phenomenal properties) and intentionality (or intentional / representational properties).

Metaphysically possible

Something (e.g. a claim or some imaginary scenario) is metaphysically possible if there is at least one possible world in which it is true (e.g. a world without sentient life). This is sometimes distinguished from logical possibility, where the focus is on what can be thought of (without contradiction or incoherence) rather than what could possibly exist (e.g. some philosophers would grant that it is logically possible that water is not H₂O but deny that there is a possible world where water is not H₂O).

Mind-brain type identity theory

A reductive, physicalist (or materialist) theory, which claims that types of mental states are ontologically (but not analytically) identical to types of brain (or neural) states.

Multiple realisability (issues for behaviourism)

The claim that the same mental state can be expressed in a variety of behaviours (possibly an infinite number), which challenges the view that mental states are reducible to specific behaviours or behavioural dispositions.

Multiple realisability (issues for mind-brain type identity theory)

The claim that the same mental state can be instantiated by different physical processes (possibly an infinite number), which challenges the view that types of mental state are identical to types of brain state.

New knowledge/old fact response ('knowledge/Mary' argument)

A response to the 'knowledge/Mary' argument for property dualism (and against reductive physicalism). The response grants that when Mary – a scientist specialising in the neurophysiology of colour, and knowing all the relevant physical facts, despite living in a black and white environment - sees colour for the first time, she does indeed acquire new (propositional) knowledge, but she does not acquire knowledge of a new non-physical fact. Rather, Mary knows an 'old fact' (a physical one she had already acquired) in a new way, having acquired phenomenal concepts (for colour) that were not available to her before. So, the physical facts still constitute a complete explanation of Mary's perception, and there is no need to appeal to non-physical mental properties.

Natural selection/evolution

Natural selection is one of the mechanisms which drives biological evolution (as proposed by Darwin). Nature 'selects' organisms that are best adapted to their environment because they are more likely to survive, breed, and pass on the same characteristics that proved beneficial to their survival. This process, which we now know occurs due to genetic mutations, causes species to develop and diverge over time.

Natural selection/evolution (issues for epiphenomenalist dualism)

An objection to the epiphenomenalist dualist's claim that mental states have no causal role in our behaviour (and on the physical world more generally). On the epiphenomenalist dualist's view, our intuition that the mental states of fear and pain, for example, are causally connected to our avoiding life-threatening injuries, is simply false. However, evolution by natural selection is a process which 'selects' those traits which are conducive to the survival of physical organisms. So, if mental states have evolved, they should be conducive to the survival of physical organisms. But if mental states have no physical effects, they cannot make a difference to whether we - or any other physical organism - survive or not. So, if we accept evolution by natural selection, we should reject the thesis that mental states are causally impotent.

Ordinary language (behaviourism/Ryle)

Language that is in common (or everyday) usage. For some philosophical behaviourists (e.g. Ryle) an analysis of the mind should be conducted using the language we would ordinarily use to refer to mental states (e.g. 'beliefs', 'intentions', and 'desires') and the language we would ordinarily use to refer to behaviour (e.g. 'writing', 'walking', 'singing') or behavioural dispositions (e.g. 'prone to shouting'). For Ryle, ordinary language about mental states can be translated (without loss of meaning) to ordinary language about behaviour or behavioural disputations.

Perfect actors (issues for behaviourism)

It is conceivable that a perfect actor would be able to simulate any mental state (e.g. joy, fear, pain) such that there would be no observable difference between someone actually in that mental state (a non-actor) and the perfect actor. This obvious difference between the simulated mental state (e.g. the performance of the perfect actor in pain) and the actual mental state (e.g. the pain of the non-actor) undermines the behaviourists' claim that language about mental states can be reduced, without loss of meaning, to language about behaviour (or behavioural dispositions).

Phenomenal properties

The experiential properties (or features) of some (if not all) conscious mental states. For many philosophers, phenomenal properties are synonymous with 'qualia'.

Phenomenology of our mental life

Phenomenology is concerned with the first-person appearance of conscious mental states: the life of the mind, intentional and qualitative, including (for some philosophers) the causal connections between psychological states and between psychological states (e.g. desires) and physical states (e.g. behaviours).

Phenomenology of our mental life (issues for epiphenomenalist dualism)

An objection to epiphenomenalist dualism which appeals to the seemingly self-evident causal connections we witness in our own mental lives, as our mental/psychological states interact causally with each other, and our mental/psychological states interact causally with our behaviour.

Philosophical zombie (Chalmers/property dualism)

An argument by Chalmers for property dualism (and against reductive physicalism) which proposes that it is conceivable, and therefore possible, that there are beings who are physically (and so behaviourally) identical to human beings but lack conscious mental states (or qualia). Because this is possible, conscious states (qualia) are not physical: they are non-physical properties of the mind.

Philosophical zombies

Hypothetical creatures who are exact physical (and so behavioural) duplicates of human beings but lack consciousness (or qualia). These creatures feature in arguments for property dualism (and against reductive physicalism).

Physicalism

The theory that everything that exists is physical (or material) or it is reducible to the physical (or material). In the philosophy of mind, this refers to a family of positions which reject the existence of non-physical mental substances or properties. Some physicalists argue that mental states (e.g. beliefs and sensations) can or will be fully explained in physical terms (e.g. reduced to some physical facts); others argue that mental states (as we commonly understand them) will be eliminated from advanced physical theories of mind (e.g. mature brain science will find no use for these 'folk-psychological' concepts).

Physical properties

The characteristic features or attributes of physical (or material) phenomena: the properties discovered by and referred to in the natural sciences (e.g. the positive or negative charge of subatomic physical particles).

Problem of other minds

The problem of other minds is an issue for dualism. Dualism prioritises first-person (introspective) knowledge of the mind (or mental states). The problem that arises is epistemological: to explain how we could know, or even have good reason to believe, that other minds exist, given that we have direct access only to our own minds (or mental states), whereas our conclusions about others' minds (or mental states) are merely inferred from their behaviour.

Properties

Properties are the features or attributes of a substance or object.

Propositional knowledge

Knowledge 'that' some proposition (or claim) is true: propositional knowledge is concerned with facts (e.g. that Washington D.C. is the capital of the United States of America).

Psychological

Anything which concerns the mind or mental states.

Psycho-physical

The relationship between mental/psychological states and bodily/physical states, including causal relationships.

Qualia

Intrinsic and non-intentional phenomenal properties that are introspectively accessible (i.e. 'what it is like' to experience something, such as the taste of coffee).

Some philosophers use 'qualia' to refer to 'phenomenal properties' of the mind (or mental states) regardless of their ontological commitments (e.g. physicalist or dualist); some use 'qualia' to refer specifically to 'non-physical phenomenal properties'; and some philosophers deny that 'qualia' refers to any phenomenal properties because no such properties exist.

Reduction (analytical)

To claim that a certain language (or a way of speaking) about a phenomenon can be analytically reduced is to say that it can be translated (without loss of meaning) into some other language (or way of speaking). In the philosophy of mind this refers to the claim that language (e.g. claims) about mental states can be reduced, without loss of meaning, to language about some other states (e.g. behavioural or functional).

Reduction (ontological)

To claim that some phenomenon X is ontologically reducible to some phenomenon Y is just to say that they are in fact the same type/kind of phenomenon. In a physicalist philosophy of mind like mind-brain type identity theory, the argument is made that types of mental states are identical to types of brain state: so what is true of mental states and their properties is true because of (and is therefore reducible to) what is true of physical states and their properties.

Self-knowledge

First-person awareness of our own mental states (events or processes).

Self-refuting

A claim or theory is said to be self-refuting if in the very act of making a claim or proposing a theory one (implicitly) demonstrates why it must be false (e.g. 'The problem with this sentence is that it has no meaning').

Self-refuting (issues for eliminative materialism)

Eliminative materialism (at its most radical) proposes the theory that ordinary ('folk psychological') mental states do not exist. A successful case for eliminative materialism would result in philosophers believing this theory to be true on the basis of the persuasive reasons given for eliminative materialism. But (cognitive and intentional) mental states such as 'being persuaded' and 'believing theories to be true' are among the folk psychological states which eliminative materialism rejects. The successful articulation of eliminative materialism as a theory would therefore rely on the very things it denies, and for that reason is self-refuting.

Substance

The concept of 'substance' has been used by philosophers in a number of ways. Two important ones are: (1) to refer to the fundamental features of a philosopher's ontology (their theory about what exists): for Descartes, this would include physical/material beings (characterised by extension) and mental beings (characterised by thought); (2) to refer to an individual (e.g. a human being), who may bear a whole range of properties (e.g. hair colour) which are accidental rather than essential to their nature.

Descartes also suggests that substances are those things which are 'capable of existing independently'. Strictly speaking, only God exists as perfectly independent substance, but Descartes argues that God has also created at least two substances (minds characterised by thought, and bodies characterised by extension) which could exist independently because of the different essential natures God has given them.

Super Spartans (issues for behaviourism)

Super Spartans feature in a thought experiment created by Putnam. They are a hypothetical people who feel pain, just as humans typically do, but they are able and willing to suppress all pain behaviour. The conceivability (and presumed possibility) of such a people is used by Putnam to challenge the claims of behaviourism – that language about mental states can be reduced (without loss of meaning) to language about behaviour or behavioural dispositions.

Given that there is never any behavioural evidence of pain among the Super Spartans, despite the fact they are sometimes in the mental state of pain, there is no possibility of reducing (without loss of meaning) all language about their mental states to language about their behaviour or behavioural dispositions. The possibility of this case suggests that behaviourism fails to give an exhaustive analysis of mental states.

Supervene

A relationship of dependence between facts or properties of one kind (x) and facts or properties of another kind (y), such that x supervenes on y if and only if there can be no change in x without a change in y. In the philosophy of mind, some physicalists (or materialists) insist that mental states would neither exist nor change without the existence and change of physical states (e.g. brain states).

Thought experiment

A philosophical method, often used in the philosophy of mind, which is designed to test the logic and/or plausibility of a philosophical claim against a hypothetical case/scenario which is presumed to be logically and metaphysically possible (e.g. Jackson's knowledge/Mary' argument, and Putnam's Super Spartans argument).

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