

The minutes of the dissertation defence

Student: Jakub Mihálik

Date of Birth: 4. 7. 1980

Student's ID number: 289198

Study Programme: Philosophy

Branch of Study: Philosophy

Habilitation Title: "Consciousness in Nature. A Russellian Approach"

Language of the Dissertation: English

Language of the Defence: English

Supervisor: doc. James Hill, Ph.D.

Opponents: Mgr. Juraj Hvorecký, Ph.D. and Dr. Sam Coleman

Date of Defence: 12th December 2016

Place of Defence: UK FF, nám J. Palacha 2, 116 38 Praha 1, room 224

Date of Defence: Regular Date

Chair of the Board: doc. PhDr. Vojtěch Kolman, Ph.D.

Members of the Board: Prof. RNDr. Ladislav Kvasz, Dr.

Mgr. Jan Palkoska, Ph.D.

Mgr. Ondřej Švec, Ph.D.

Mgr. Tomáš Marvan, Ph.D.

Persons present: According to the attendance list

10:07 The chair of the board Vojtěch Kolman started the defence, introduced himself, members of the board present and opponents present. Then he introduced the student to the persons present.

10:10 The supervisor James Hill introduced briefly to the persons present his evaluation of the student's study and dissertation, given in his written report.

10:16 The student Jakub Mihálik presented the propositions of his dissertation to the persons present. He said in particular that in his dissertation, he tackles the question whether consciousness could be a physical or physically realized process. He stated that the thesis can be divided into three parts: 1. Introduction and framing the question within a wider philosophical context; 2. Discussion and critique of the physicalist approaches to consciousness; 3. Discussion and critique of the non-reductive approaches to consciousness. The most promising view of consciousness in nature is called *constitutive Russellian panpsychism*. According to Russell, physics provides us with a structural information about the physical world, but this information is essentially incomplete: there is much information about the physical events that escapes our physical theories, namely the information about the intrinsic aspect of physical event. However, we have an epistemic access to this intrinsic aspect in virtue of being directly acquainted with our percepts. In this way we can, according to Russell, naturally integrate our percepts with their qualitative features into the physical world. In chapter 6, Jakub Mihálik tries to flesh out the broadly constructed Russellian view and argues that there are strong reasons to opt for constitutive Russellian panpsychism.

10:28 The opponent Sam Coleman presented the main points of his report and the conclusion, stating that he recommends the submitted dissertation for defence. He put these questions to the student:

The thesis presents an argument by elimination. It aims to show the constitutive Russellian panpsychism as the best theory of consciousness by eliminating competing views. This kind of argument is weakened by any failure to knock out the competition, and there are several such failures in the thesis. The project would better be construed more softly, as explaining the shortcomings of other views and the merits of the author's preferred view.

Jakub Mihálik often criticizes the competing theories for their lack of clear explanation and for pulling mysterious relations as a solution of the consciousness problem. However, the view Jakub Mihálik proposes suffers the same problem. The notion of proto-co-consciousness comes in as a kind of black box. His panpsychism faces a problem that is a variation of the old William James's problem: how can you get one big consciousness by combination of "little people"?

When the student criticizes a posteriori physicalists (p. 83), he works with the presumption that phenomenal state is a state for which appearance is its reality. Wouldn't a posteriori physicalist deny this?

10:35 The opponent Juraj Hvorecký presented the main points of his report and the conclusion, stating that he recommends the submitted dissertation for defence. He put these questions to the student:

What kind of knowledge is phenomenal knowledge? It can be veridical. But what is it that makes it true or false? The phenomenal knowledge is not propositional. So what kind of knowledge is it? Is it procedural?

The difference between the terms "translucent" and "transparent" is not clear. Jakub Mihálik speaks about the phenomenal concepts as being translucent rather than transparent. What is it that is not captured by phenomenal concepts?

The discussion of emergence in chapter 5 is the weakest moment of the dissertation. It's unfair to the emergentists. It might be more appropriate to discuss Davidson's account of emergentism instead of the Strawson's account.

The notion of causation is problematic, Russell himself was of an opinion that it plays no role in science and should be scrapped. If causation is a pseudo-problem, then the problem with upward causation and the existence of new ontological domain is misguided.

Regarding the chapter on panpsychism: Are quiddities properties? Then they must be something more than ultimate realizers. If they are properties, then properties of what?

More importantly: how can microphenomenal properties have contents? If they don't have content, that is if they just have pure consciousness, then it is unclear how they eventually get one. If they have contents, we need to know more about what is their content. Sensory states are not the only components of consciousness, there are emotions, propositional attitudes, metacognitive states, urges etc. What is it in the micro-properties that it can contribute to a

thought “Trump is going to be a fantastic president”? Or is that conscious thought a part of a building block of this universe? I hope not.

On proto-co-consciousness account, if I lose substantial part of my constitutive particles, it should effect my consciousness. So upon losing my legs, I should lose roughly one third of my consciousness. It's true that Mihálik speaks about brains and their organization, not legs and other parts of the body. Yet even that is a problem – there are well documented cases of removal of one hemisphere due to epilepsy. Still, these patients are functioning normally, especially when they were operated at the young age. Yet half of their important microproperties are gone. Do they have quasi-consciousness as well?

Final worry: It is difficult to understand how the quiddities relations are related to the causal relations. What is it for a causal relation to be realized by such a quiddity relation?

10:45 The student reacted to the opponents' comments and their questions:

He said that he liked the specification of his argument as an argument by elimination. However, he didn't aim to knock out the competing views. He goes through various positions, evaluates them, criticizes them, and concludes that they don't work. He admits that he hasn't convinced everyone about the falsity of the other views but the thesis doesn't rely on it.

He also pointed out that his main criticism of the competing views is not that they are not perspicuous. The criticism does not depend on the notion of perspicuousness. He admits that the account of constitutive Russellian panpsychism as the best theory of consciousness is not transparent. We have an intuitive grasp of how different qualia, i.e. color and sound qualia, are jointly experienced but the solution of the combination problem could be more transparent.

Regarding the critique of the aposteriori physicalism, the main point is that aposteriori physicalism has very strange and unintuitive consequences, namely that it results in a very strange and unintuitive view about phenomenal concepts. You have to hold the view that phenomenal concepts are like blind pointers, that they don't reveal to us any knowledge. But our intuitions are that they do provide us with knowledge.

Jakub Mihálik expressed his appreciation of the question about what kind of knowledge our phenomenal concepts reveal to us. He confirmed that they do reveal to us a knowledge about their reference. Just by having the concept of being in pain one knows a lot about being in pain. The same about a red experience. Perhaps it is the Russellian knowledge by direct acquaintance.

Regarding the difference between the concept of transparent and translucent, Jakub Mihálik said that while there are concepts that are radically opaque (Goff and Papineau), phenomenal concepts are not that kind of concepts, they reveal to us at least some essential true about their referent. However, they are not absolutely transparent concepts (like sphericity, or God) either. That's why they are described as translucent rather than transparent in the dissertation.

Regarding the discussion of emergence in chapter 5, Jakub Mihálik stated that for the most of the chapter he defended emergentism, and he defended it against two influential arguments: Nagel's and Strawson's. He didn't discuss some important philosophers views, e.g. Davidson,

because at this point of the dissertation he had shown that consciousness is not physical. So he needed to address dualist emergentism.

Jakub Mihálik appreciated the point about causation as thought provoking and worth to consider. However, he thinks that it is hard to get rid of the notion of causation. He also remarked that Russell himself might have come to the same conclusion in his later works.

He pointed out that the quiddities are considered to be properties by most people in the relevant debate (Chalmers). But maybe that should be reconsidered. However, in the dissertation, nothing fundamental depends on that.

11:40 The opponents commented on the performance of the student.

The opponent Juraj Hvorecký returned to the problem of the content of microphenomenal properties and suggested that panpsychism could be a theory saying that there is a phenomenal property in every piece of universe without committing to a particular kind. There is no reason to require that the phenomenal property is a sensory element.

Jakub Mihálik replied that he distinguishes between consciousness and propositional attitudes (or intentionality): the former is not physically reducible while the latter is physically reducible.

Sam Coleman re-raised his objection that Jakub Mihálik criticizes emergentism and panqualityism for unintelligibility while the theory he proposes as the solution suffers the same problem.

Jakub denied that the criticism of emergentism and panqualityism aims at their unintelligibility. He criticizes the fundamental ontological mystery that they rely on. In those theories, something just appears out of nothing. This is much more than mere unintelligibility.

11:58 The chair of the board opened the discussion.

These persons spoke in the following discussion:

The member of the board Tomáš Marvan commented that Jakub Mihálik discussed Dennett's article that, on the one hand, is famous and is considered to be a classic work on the problem but, on the other hand, is a little bit outdated. There is a recent article by Dennett on the same topic in which Dennett revises his old theory.

Jakub Mihálik appreciated this information.

The member of the board Ondřej Švec raised a question from phenomenology whether we need a more radical revision of the initial framework. Consciousness is perhaps more fundamental than nature. In order to have a scientific theory, there have to be statements that are consciously understood. The consciousness plays a constitutive role here. The result of such a revision is not necessarily an idealism, it can well be a kind of pragmatism.

Jakub Mihálik replied that he himself is rather close to Sellars's view. He admitted that he noticed the renewed interest in idealism in analytic philosophy.

The member of the board Ladislav Kvasz remarked that what struck him the most in the discussion was the fact that the biology is left out. The account could benefit from biology, for example the way how the cells combine into an organism with a functional immunity could be an inspiration for the problem of the combination. Biology could form a more productive fundamental level than physics.

Jakub Mihálik in his response expressed a worry that such a theory would still need a sort of emergence. Phenomenal properties are not amenable to functionalization.

12:13 The chair of the board ended the defence itself and the board initiated a private meeting on classification of the dissertation defence.

The chair of the board announced to the student and persons present the result of the defence: The board voted, number of the members of the board 5 – number of the members of the board present 5 – positive votes 5, negative votes 0. The dissertation defence was classified pass.

Recorder: Mgr. Pavla Toráčová, Ph.D.

Name and signature of the chair of the board:

doc. PhDr. Vojtěch Kolman, Ph.D.



Name and signature of another member of the board:

Jan Palbocak, Ph.D. 

