STALNAKER ON SENSUOUS KNOWLEDGE*

ABSTRACT. Robert Stalnaker has recently argued that a pair of natural thoughts are incompatible. One of them is the view that items of non-indexical factual knowledge rule out possibilities. The other is the view that knowing what sensuous experience is like involves non-indexical knowledge of its phenomenal character. I argue against Stalnaker’s take on things, elucidating along the way how our knowledge of what experience is like fits together with the natural idea that items of non-indexical factual knowledge rule out possibilities.

1. THE ISSUE

Robert Stalnaker has recently argued that a pair of natural thoughts are incompatible. One of them concerns non-indexical factual knowledge – which I’ll call “thick” factual knowledge – and the other concerns the extent of such knowledge. Here are the thoughts:

1. Items of thick factual knowledge rule out possibilities.
2. Knowing what sensuous experience is like involves thick factual knowledge of its phenomenal character.

For our purposes, these will be known as the knowledge-possibility and sensuous-knowledge principles. Stalnaker argues they are incompatible by appeal to a well-known thought experiment.

He asks us to consider a variant of Jackson’s story about Mary the super-scientist. In it Mary is told – while still in her black-and-white room – that she will see a red thing or a

* I am grateful to Ned Block, Dave Chalmers, Benj Hellie, Mike Martin, Susanna Siegel, Robert Stalnaker and especially Maja Spener for help with this work.
green one depending on a coin-flip out of sight. At this stage of the story, it seems clear that Mary does not know which colour she will end up seeing. The coin is then flipped and Mary is presented with a red thing. She comes to enjoy a normal phenomenal experience of redness. At this stage of the story, it seems clear that Mary will be grabbed by her experience. It will be her first sensuous experience of redness — or any other chromatic colour — and thus its phenomenal character will receive her undivided attention. So we can say:

(3) Mary comes to know what her experience is like.

But it is also seems clear, at this stage of the story, that Mary does not come to know which colour she ends up seeing (red or green). Or as we might put it:

(4) Mary cannot rule out the red or green future as hers.

Yet red and green futures are phenomenally distinct. What it would be like for Mary were she to see a red thing is not equal to what it would be like for her were she to see a green one.

Stalnaker draws a stark conclusion. He says the knowledge mentioned in (3) — Mary’s sensuous knowledge of what her experience is like — is not knowledge “that the quality of [her] immediate experience is the way that it in fact is.” The idea is that sensuous knowledge does not amount, even in part, to thick factual knowledge of the phenomenal character of experience. And if that is right, of course, (2) is plain false. Knowing what sensuous experience is like does not involve thick factual knowledge of its phenomenal character.

Stalnaker’s argument for this striking conclusion is simple:

Stalnaker’s Argument

(a) If Mary’s knowledge at (3) did involve thick factual knowledge of her experience’s phenomenal character, then, by the knowledge-possibility principle, the item of that knowledge would rule out futures incompatible with it.