

## The Spirit, the Taste of Salt, and the Irreducibility of Qualitative Experience

Education Week 2018

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## Our Discussion

Discuss how **philosophy** has helped me better understand the Spirit / revelation.

1. Set up a philosophical problem
2. Discuss a solution and its problems
3. Apply this to understanding the Spirit / revelation

## About Me



I grew up in Burbank, California and served a mission in the France Bordeaux Mission (1991-1993). I studied Philosophy as an undergraduate at BYU and then completed my MA and PhD in Philosophy at UCLA. I have been at BYU for the past 14 years. I'm married and have four children (ages 14 to 9) which keep me and my wife very busy. I enjoy cooking / baking, gardening, and furniture building. I'm an amateur computer geek. I love the church and the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

## What is Philosophy?

Study of the most *fundamental* and *general* concepts, principles, and features of reality: truth, knowledge, beauty, morality, existence . . .

Philosophers ask questions like:

- What is truth?
- What is knowledge? Is all knowledge based on the senses?
- What is beauty? Is beauty objective, or is beauty "in th eye of the beholder"?
- What is right and wrong (Morality)? What is the purpose of life?
- What is happiness?
- What is existence?
- How do all these things fit together?

Philosophers form theories and debate the merits of the theories for these “big” questions.

Examples:

*Theories of Morality:* utilitarianism, deontology, virtue theory, egoism, Kantian ethics, voluntarism . . .

*Theories of Truth:* deflationary, coherence, correspondence, semantic . . .



Probably my best ever tomato plant. I have pruned it regularly, and topped it off.



My 12 year old.

## What’s an essential difference?

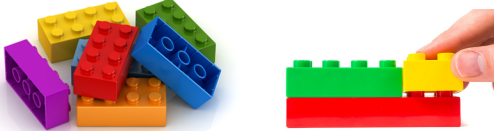
- Humans have a **MIND**: thoughts, feelings, emotions. Humans reason, deliberate, contemplate; they think and feel. Humans have an inner, subjective life. Humans are conscious.
- We call this the **mind** (sometimes it’s referred to as the “spirit” or “soul”).

## Question: how does the mind relate to the body?



*Rene Descartes* (1596-1650): the mind and the body are separate entities. The body is physical, the mind (spirit, soul) is non-physical. (Dualism)

Concern: how does a physical thing interact with a non-physical thing?

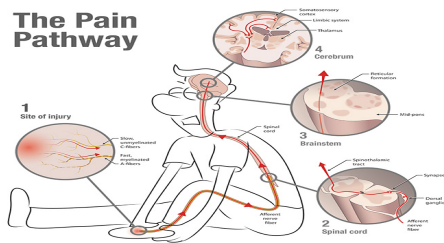


**Alternate View** (popular in recent times): the mind is just the brain. (i.e. there is no additional, non-physical thing called a “soul” or “spirit”.) This view is a kind of “physicalism”, the view that all reality is physical. Resolves the previous concern.



## The Mind = the Brain

### The Pain Pathway



Classic example: **pain = certain neurons firing**  
(and that's ALL there is to it)

<http://www.neurowest.org/blog/pain-in-the-brain>

Thomas Nagel: “What is it like to be a Bat?” (1974)

- Criticism: physicalism leaves out the most important part of pain, the *subjective experience of being in pain*, the “feeling” of pain.
- The feeling of pain is not describable in physical terms—no physical words describe it. (**The irreducibility of qualitative experience**)
- You could objectively know all there is to know about the brain, neurons, pain stimuli . . . But you would still not know what it is like to experience pain. (ex: congenital insensitivity to pain)
- Describing pain to someone who has not felt pain is *not possible*.

**How do you describe the color red? Could you describe it to someone who has never seen red?**

"Loose intermodal analogies—for example, "Red is like the sound of a trumpet"—are of little use. That should be clear to anyone who has both heard a trumpet and seen red." (Nagel, "What it is like to be a bat?")

Try to describe red to someone who has not experienced red. Give a "physical description" of red. You can't. This is the **irreducibility of qualitative experience**. (No description in terms of the brain, or neurons firing, will be adequate.)

Dictionary definition of "red":

"any of various colors resembling the color of blood; the primary color at one extreme end of the visible spectrum, an effect of light with a wavelength between 610 and 780 nanometers" (dictionary.com)

Note how the above assumes that you know what red is like, that you've subjectively experienced Red.

Conclusion: there must be more to the mind than just the brain—physicalism is false.

C.S. Lewis: "Meditation in a Toolshed"



**C.S. Lewis ("Meditation in a Toolshed"):**

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.

Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.

C.S. Lewis: "A physiologist, for example, can study pain and find out that it "is" (whatever *is* means) such and such neural events. But the word *pain* would have no meaning for him unless he had "been inside" [subjectively experienced it] by actually suffering. If he had never looked *along* pain [subjectively experienced it] he simply wouldn't know what he was looking *at*. The very subject for his inquiries from outside [objectively] exists for him only because he has, at least once, been inside [experienced it subjectively]."

### Biographical Digression / Transition

I read Thomas Nagel in graduate school.  
As LDS, we believe in Spirits, so this result  
accords with that.

More: the “taste” of salt—Elder Packer



### Elder Boyd K. Packer

Elder Packer: “The Candle of  
the Lord” (1982)

Like the example of “red” (or  
being a bat), Elder Packer’s  
example of salt relies on **the  
irreducibility of qualitative  
experience**.

Table Salt: NaCl; You can know  
everything about Sodium,  
Chloride, its structure . . . and  
not know what salt tastes like.



#### Elder Packer’s Salt Example. . .

Elder Packer, “The Candle of the Lord” (June 25, 1982; talk to new mission presidents. Reprinted in *Ensign*, January 1983, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1983/01/the-candle-of-the-lord?lang=eng>)

I sat on a plane next to a professed atheist who pressed his disbelief in God so urgently that I bore my testimony to him. “You are wrong,” I said, “there is a God. I know He lives!”

He protested, “You don’t know. Nobody knows that! You can’t know it!” When I would not yield, the atheist, who was an attorney, asked perhaps the ultimate question on the subject of testimony. “All right,” he said in a sneering, condescending way, “you say you know. Tell me how you know.”

When I attempted to answer, even though I held advanced academic degrees, I was helpless to communicate. . . . When I used the words Spirit and witness, the atheist responded, “I don’t know what you are talking about.” The words prayer, discernment, and faith, were equally meaningless to him. “You see,” he said, “you don’t really know. If you did, you would be able to tell me how you know.”

Then came the experience! Something came into my mind . . . and I said to the atheist, “Let me ask if you know what salt tastes like.”

“Of course I do,” was his reply.

“When did you taste salt last?”

“I just had dinner on the plane.”

“You just think you know what salt tastes like,” I said.

He insisted, “I know what salt tastes like as well as I know anything.”

“If I gave you a cup of salt and a cup of sugar and let you taste them both, could you tell the salt from the sugar?”

“Now you are getting juvenile,” was his reply. “Of course I could tell the difference. I know what salt tastes like. It is an everyday experience—I know it as well as I know anything.”

“Then,” I said, “assuming that I have never tasted salt, explain to me just what it tastes like.”

After some thought, he ventured, “Well-I-uh, it is not sweet and it is not sour.”

“You’ve told me what it isn’t, not what it is.”

After several attempts, of course, he could not do it. He could not convey, in words alone, so ordinary an experience as tasting salt. I bore testimony to him once again and said, “I know there is a God. You ridiculed that testimony and said that if I did know, I would be able to tell you exactly how I know. My friend, spiritually speaking, I have tasted salt.”

- Elder Packer: “We do not have the words (even the scriptures do not have words) which perfectly describe the Spirit. The scriptures generally use the word voice, which does not exactly fit. These delicate, refined spiritual communications are not seen with our eyes, nor heard with our ears. And even though it is described as a voice, it is a voice that one feels, more than one hears.”

The “still small voice”—why is this a paradoxical description?

Galatians 5:22-23: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

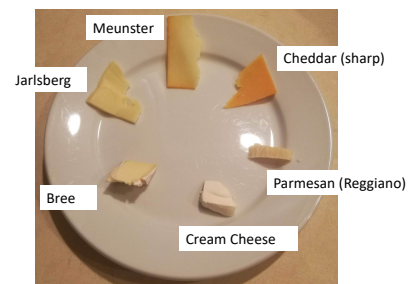
*Ultimately, how do we teach another to recognize the Spirit, if words are not adequate?*

**Concern:** Once you’ve tasted salt, you’ll never forget it. Same with seeing red. But recognizing the Spirit seems more elusive—not so simple.

What’s going on?

### The Taste of Cheese

How can anyone govern a nation that has two hundred and forty-six different kinds of cheese? —Charles de Gaulle (former president of France)



## The Taste of Chocolate



Just like learning to recognize a color, or salt, or a kind of cheese, or chocolate, we learn, and relearn, the “taste” of the Spirit by actively engaging in activities where the Spirit is present (or can be present).

Where to taste the Spirit: Church meetings, earnest scripture study, temple attendance, acts of service, Enos-like prayer, general conference talks, serving in church callings . . .

## Learning to Recognize the Spirit:

Prophet Joseph Smith: “A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas . . . and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation, until you become perfect in Christ Jesus.” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1977, p. 151.)

President Julie B. Beck: “The ability to qualify for, receive, and act on personal revelation is the single most important skill that can be acquired in this life.” (April 2010, “And upon the Handmaids in Those Days Will I Pour Out My Spirit”)

## Concluding Thoughts

We learn to recognize the spirit in a specific way: by experiencing it. But it is not unlike many other things we learn. As with these other things, we can deliberately seek to develop this skill (this gift), and “grow in the principle of revelation.”

**Irreducibility of qualitative experience:** we’ve approached it from two angles, philosophical and religious. When we do that, when we approach a truth from multiple points of view, our understanding of it can increase exponentially. Hence, the importance of learning broadly and seeking connections in our understanding.