

The knowledge argument

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1 The case for qualia

1.1 *What are qualia?*

Jackson describes himself as a ‘qualia freak.’ By this he just means that he believes that qualia exist. But what are qualia?

Roughly, qualia are properties of having a certain conscious state — like feeling a pain or an itch, or having a reddish visual sensation — which are not identical to any physical property.

So an identity theorist or a functionalist will agree with Jackson that there are conscious states — but both will deny that there are qualia, since both will identify those conscious states with physical properties (physical-chemical properties in the case of the identity theorist, and functional properties in the case of the functionalist).

1.2 *Fred*

Jackson’s argument for qualia turns on two examples. The first is the example of Fred:

‘Fred has better colour vision than anyone else on record; he makes every discrimination that anyone has ever made, and moreover he makes one that we cannot even begin to make. Show him a batch of ripe tomatoes and he sorts them into two roughly equal groups and does so with complete consistency. That is, if you blindfold him, shuffle the tomatoes up, and then remove the

blindfold and ask him to sort them out again, he sorts them into exactly the same two groups. We ask Fred how he does it. He explains that all ripe tomatoes do not look the same colour to him, and in fact that this is true of a great many objects that we classify together as red.'

We might discover, as Jackson says, that Fred's ability seems to be explained by certain physiological differences between him and everyone else. In this case, it would seem reasonable to believe that Fred has color experiences which we do not.

But it seems like — even if we know all of the physical facts about Fred's visual experiences — we cannot know what it is like for him to have these experiences. So despite knowledge of all of the physical facts about Fred, there is at least one fact about Fred's experience that we don't know. So there is at least one fact about Fred's conscious experience which is not a physical fact. So, there are qualia.

1.3 *Mary*

Jackson's example of Mary has become even more well-known:

'Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television monitor. She specialises in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like 'red', 'blue', and so on. She discovers, for example, just which wave-length combinations from the sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces via the central nervous system the contraction of the vocal chords and expulsion of air from the lungs that results in the uttering of the sentence 'The sky is blue.' ...

What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a colour television monitor? Will she learn anything or not? It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. But then it is inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. But she had all the physical information. Ergo there is more to have than that, and Physicalism is false.

2 The argument formalized

Following Gertler, the Mary version of the knowledge argument can be laid out like this:

1. While in the black-and-white room, Mary knows all of the physical facts about color experience.
 2. Mary learns something about color experience upon her release.
 3. If Mary learns something about color experience upon her release, she does not know all of the facts about color experience while in the room.
 4. Mary does not know all of the facts about color experience while in the room. (2,3)
 5. There are facts about color experience that are not physical facts. (1,4)
 6. If physicalism is true, then all facts are physical facts.
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- C. Physicalism is false. (5,6)

‘Physicalism’ here just is the view that all facts are physical facts. The argument would also work against the more restricted thesis that all facts about conscious experience are physical facts; and this more restricted thesis would be endorsed by identity theorists and standard kinds of functionalists. So, if the knowledge argument is sound, identity theory and functionalism are false.

3 Jackson’s positive view: epiphenomenalism

So Jackson denies that properties like having a reddish experience are either physical or functional properties. As he recognizes, this leads to a puzzle: what are these properties? How do they fit into the physical world?

There are, as we discussed earlier, two main answers to the second question. The interactionist says that these qualia are caused by physical events, and cause other physical events. The epiphenomenalist says that these qualia are caused by physical events, but do not themselves cause any other physical events.

Jackson goes for epiphenomenalism (thus the title of his paper). He does not say why he rejects interactionism, but he likely has in mind the fact that interactionism would seem to conflict with the causal closure of the physical: the view that every physical event has a physical cause.

He considers and rejects three arguments against epiphenomenalism:

- Objection: it is just obvious that pain causes physical responses! Reply: instances of a common cause can seem like cause/effect relationships; the example of movies.
- Objection: if qualia don’t do anything, they could not have evolved; but it is clear that we are evolved creatures. Reply: some properties of evolved creatures are not selected for, but are instead byproducts of features which are selected for. The example of the heaviness of the polar bear’s coat.
- Objection: if there were qualia, we could not know that other people have experiences; but we do. Reply: we infer this from a common cause; the example of multiple newspapers.