

PHILOSOPHY 250 MINDS AND MACHINES CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

What Mary Didn't Know

Physicalism is the challenging thesis that everything existing in this world is only as extensive as its physical properties, therefore the actual world is physical in its entirety. The physicalist argument is most famously represented by a thought experiment introduced by Frank Jackson, consisting of Mary, confined in a black and white room, learning all there is to know about physical nature in black and white. To confirm physicalism, she would have to know all there is to know, however, Jackson denies this claim, as when she is released from the black-and-white room, she will see colour and experience new things rather than simply knowing its properties (Jackson, p. 291). While Jackson's thought experiment raises significant doubts about physicalism, there are certain theories which he fails to cover within his claims.

Mary possesses various types of knowledge with various methods of acquiring that knowledge through different inputs. Her visual system learns solely from visual input, and cannot process knowledge from other inputs such as language processing. This argument develops upon David Lewis and Laurence Nemirow's objection that Mary does not necessarily gain a new fact, but rather "acquires a certain representational or imaginative ability" (Jackson p.293) with respect to those facts. The information learned for her visual system may be stored mistakenly or in the wrong format. This could be represented by a video file stored on a smartphone's memory card, written in the wrong format. The smartphone cannot process said video format, therefore a video driver is installed to enable the smartphone to read the format of the video. The video can now be read, with no new file downloaded nor deleted. The action of installing a driver relates to acquiring a new input for information processing, which in Mary's case, would be colour vision.

One may regard this analogy with skepticism, as most have trouble accepting that mental experiences are purely physical due to the fact that we remain unable to convey information by description, as they must be experienced directly. While the fact that one must experience to get a proper understanding could be conceded, the inability to articulate information does not necessarily sort the knowledge into an immaterial category. Such can be defined as an error in our communication methods. We simply do not possess the linguistic ability to describe in words the experience of colour or sound in words. When explaining a colour in terms, its chemical process is being described, therefore, Mary's knowledge must include human neurology, which contains the qualia in question. Even so, the question remains, how does physicalism account for qualia?

The firing of neurons can be considered as the experience itself. The neurons processing the information of a reflected wavelength captured by the retina, associating it with a known colour and storing the information in the memory create the experience itself. The reason why Mary can't learn the experience from her black and white world is that her brain cannot process the information freely. Therefore, her knowledge is not incomplete in any way, but Mary cannot fully consume its meaning. Perhaps one day, technology will evolve to a point where one will be able to experience colour through a neural interface without requiring the use of visual inputs, by enabling neurons to make connections in order to translate information into colours.