

PHILOSOPHY 250 MINDS AND MACHINES ARGUMENT EXTRACTION 1

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 subject was debated over multiple decades, with several philosophers presenting insight as to whether all that is mental is truly and entirely physical. The physicalist argument is most famously represented by a thought experiment introduced by Frank Jackson, allegedly describing the theory that a complete physical description of reality is impossible to be inclusive of phenomenal quality, or qualia of experience, hence refuting the concept of physicalism.

The thought experiment consists of Mary, a brilliant neurophysiology scientist, 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, for to suggest otherwise would in fact be rejecting physicalism by suggesting that there is more to know than explicit physical facts. However, Jackson claims that Mary does not know all there is to know, 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, proving physicalism to be false (Jackson, p. 291). The entirety of Jackson's argument purports to show that physicalism is false, as Mary indeed learns new facts when she is let out of the room. Therefore, there are non-physical properties and attainable knowledge that can only be discovered through conscious experience, through feeling and living, and understanding what it is to be like from one's own perspective.

The ambiguity in Jackson's argument surfaces when Paul M. Churchland objects that the type of knowledge involved in the first premise is distinct from the type of knowledge involved in the second, namely when comparing 'knowledge by description' to 'knowledge by acquaintance'

(Jackson, p. 293). He argues that while Mary knows everything there is to know about brain states and their properties, she does not know all there is to know about sensations and their properties, and that by Leibniz's law, sensations and their properties differ from brain states and their properties (Jackson, p. 293). Churchland thus concludes that she does not necessarily gain a new fact, but rather gains representational or imaginative abilities with respect to those facts; that she is able to process known information in a different way than she was before (Jackson p. 293).

Jackson responds to Churchland's critique by clarifying that what Mary acquires is indeed a certain representational or imaginative ability, a knowledge 'how' rather than knowledge 'that', which remains within the physicalism theory as it does not admit that her factual knowledge was defective (Jackson, p. 294). However, the fact remains that Mary does not know about the qualia associated with seeing colour, nor about others' experiences when looking at colour. Hence, she could never imagine what the relevant experience would be like despite her exhaustive neurophysiology knowledge. Only when looking at colour from her own point of view upon her release does she understand and learn the kind of experiences others have when looking at colour. Since Mary lacks the knowledge of what the relevant experience is like, her knowledge is proven to be defective no matter the limits of her imaginative abilities. Jackson grants that he has no proof that Mary acquires knowledge, abilities or factual knowledge about others' experiences, but reaffirms that his argument remains valid from plausible premises to conclusion that physicalism is flawed (Jackson, p. 295).