

Philosophy 101

Qualia and the Knowledge Argument

September 16, 2014

Review

Questions about Consciousness

- ① Does the seizure patient [or a sleepwalker] have access consciousness?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. *What's access consciousness?*

No: their mental states aren't poised for *rational* use

Questions about Consciousness

Isn't there something it is like for [the seizure subject] to see the red wall...? Searle gives no reason to think the answer is no. Because of the very inflexibility and lack of creativity of the behavior they exhibit, it is the thought processes of these patients (including A-consciousness) that are most obviously deficient; no reason at all is given to think that their P-conscious states lack vivacity or intensity. Of course, I don't claim to know what it is really like for these epileptics; my point is rather that for the argument for the function of P-consciousness to have any force, a case would have to be made that P-consciousness is actually missing, or at least diminished. (Block, 188)

Questions about Consciousness

- ② Does the fact that P and A-consciousness always seem to go together in living organisms show that Block is wrong to criticize the target reasoning?

A. Yes

B. No

C. Maybe?

No: Pointing out problems with the “target reasoning” only requires the *conceptual* distinction between types of consciousness, not an empirical one

The Target Reasoning

- ① Abnormal psychological conditions, such as blindsight and “absent” seizures, may indicate the function of consciousness
- ② When consciousness is missing under such conditions, subjects cannot
 - A. report or reason about the relevant nonconscious representations, nor use them in guiding action
 - B. exhibit flexibility and creativity in their thought and action
- ③ \therefore Consciousness enables information represented in the brain to be used in reasoning, reporting, and rationally guiding action
- ④ \therefore Consciousness promotes flexibility and creativity in thought and action

Questions about Consciousness

The fallacy, then, is jumping from the premise that “consciousness” is missing—without being clear about what kind of consciousness is missing—to the conclusion that P-consciousness has a certain function. If the distinction were seen clearly, the relevant possibilities could be reasoned about. Perhaps the lack of P-consciousness causes the lack of A-consciousness. Or perhaps the converse is the case: P-consciousness is somehow a product of A-consciousness. Or both could be the result of something else. If the distinction were clearly made, these alternatives would come to the fore. The fallacy is failing to make the distinction, rendering the alternatives invisible. (Block, 194)

Questions about Consciousness

I said at the outset that although there was a serious fallacy in the target reasoning, there was also something importantly right about it...as I mentioned earlier, cases of A-consciousness without P-consciousness, such as the super-blindsight patient...do not appear to exist...This suggests an intimate relation between A-consciousness and P-consciousness. Perhaps there is something about P-consciousness that greases the wheels of accessibility. Perhaps P-consciousness is like the liquid in a hydraulic computer...the means by which A-consciousness operates...Or perhaps P-consciousness and A-consciousness even amount to much the same thing empirically even though they differ conceptually...Perhaps the two are so entwined together that there is no empirical sense to the idea of one without the other. (Block, 194-5)

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Qualia and Physicalism

Physicalism and Dualism

- Physicalism:** Everything that is or could exist is ultimately physical in nature
- Dualism:** Physical things exist but some things that do (or could) exist are not (or are not ultimately) physical in nature (e.g. minds, souls, God)
- Idealism:** Everything that is or could exist is ultimately *mental* in nature

Qualia

Qualia: properties of at least some experiences (e.g. bodily sensations like pains and tickles) which determines what it is like to subjectively undergo the experience

- if an experience is phenomenally conscious (in Block's sense) then it has 'qualia' in Jackson's sense

Three Arguments Against Physicalism

- ① The “What it’s like” Argument
- ② The Modal Argument
- ③ The Knowledge Argument

Nagel's Argument on "What it's like"

Nagel speaks as if the problem he is raising is one of extrapolating from knowledge of one experience to another, of imagining what an unfamiliar experience would be like on the basis of familiar ones...It is hard to see an objection to Physicalism here. Physicalism makes no special claims about the imaginative or extrapolative powers of human beings, and it is hard to see why it need do so. (Jackson, 132)

The Modal Argument

- ① If physicalism were true, then the complete physical information about a subject would entail an answer as to whether she was phenomenally conscious
- ② But no amount of physical information about a person logically entails that a person is phenomenally conscious—i.e. phenomenal zombies are logically possible
- ③ \therefore Physicalism is false

Objecting to the Modal Argument

- Premise (2) is very controversial
 - only people who are antecedently suspicious of physicalism would be likely to agree with (2)
- Anti-physicalists need an argument whose premises are not going to seem as controversial to someone sympathetic to physicalism

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The Knowledge Argument

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...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? (Jackson, 130)

The Knowledge Argument

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 (Jackson, 130).

What Does Mary Know?

- Mary knows all the relevant physical information concerning human color vision
 - spectral reflectance profiles
 - human physiology
 - neurological basis of visual perception

The Basic Argument

- ① Before her release from the B&W room Mary has all the physical information concerning human color vision
- ② Mary learns something new about color when she leaves the room
- ③ \therefore There is some information about human color vision which Mary doesn't know
- ④ \therefore Not all information is physical information (i.e. physicalism is false)

An Ambiguity in the Argument

- ② Mary learns something new about color when she leaves the room
- ③ \therefore There is some information about human color vision which Mary doesn't know
 - talk of 'physical information' is ambiguous between:
 - epistemic sense of 'information': the kinds of concepts used to think about the world
 - metaphysical sense of 'information': the kinds of facts which constitute reality
- ④ \therefore Not all information is physical information (i.e. physicalism is false)

Two Versions of the Knowledge Argument

The Weaker (Epistemological) Version

- ① Mary has complete physical knowledge of the facts about human color vision before her release from the room
- ② But there is some kind of knowledge she lacks before leaving the room
- ③ \therefore There is some kind of knowledge concerning human color vision that is non-physical knowledge

Two Versions of the Knowledge Argument

The Stronger (Metaphysical) Version

- ① Mary knows all the physical facts regarding color/color vision
- ② But there are some facts about color/color vision which Mary doesn't know prior to her release
- ③ \therefore There are non-physical facts concerning color/color vision

Two Versions of the Knowledge Argument

- Physicalism is compatible with there being ways of knowing physical facts that don't use physical concepts—"old facts in new guises"
- Only the stronger metaphysical version of the argument is a threat to physicalism
 - Physicalism must deny the existence of any non-physical facts