

Philosophy 101

Qualia and the Knowledge Argument

January 29, 2015

Review

Question 1

Which form of consciousness does Nagel think is a threat to physicalism?

- A. autonomy*
- B. sentience*
- C. introspection*
- D. phenomenal consciousness*

Question 2

True or false?: Nagel thinks that facts about phenomenal consciousness are available from multiple points of view.

A. *True*

B. *False*

Question 3

Nagel conceives of objectivity in what way?

- A. available only from one point of view*
- B. existing independently of any living being*
- C. available in principle from multiple points of view*
- D. not relative to any perceiver*

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Qualia and
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The Knowledge
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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

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

Which 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