

Philosophy 101

Qualia & the Knowledge Argument

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Review

Qualia and
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- ① Which form of consciousness does Nagel think is a threat to physicalism – access or phenomenal consciousness?
- ② True or false?: Nagel thinks that facts about phenomenal consciousness are available from multiple points of view.
- ③ True or false?: Nagel thinks that physical facts are in principle available from multiple points of view.
- ④ True or false?: Block defines access consciousness in terms of what it is like to have an experience.

Questions about Consciousness

- Does the seizure patient or the sleepwalker have 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

- Don't phenomenally conscious states carry information?
 - Yes, but they don't *have to*

Questions about Consciousness

- Don't phenomenally conscious states carry information?
 - Yes, but they don't have to

The paradigm P-conscious states are sensations, whereas the paradigm A-conscious states are "propositional attitude" states like thoughts, beliefs, and desires, states with representational content expressed by "that" clauses (e.g., the thought that grass is green). However, as I said, thoughts often are P-conscious and perceptual experiences often have representational content. For example, a perceptual experience may have the representational content that there is a red square in front of me. Even pain typically has some kind of representational content. (Block, 171)

Questions about Consciousness

- Does the fact that P and A-consciousness always seem to go together in living organisms show that Block is wrong?
 - Not necessarily
 - Pointing out problems with the “target reasoning” only requires the conceptual distinction, not an empirical one

Questions about Consciousness

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
 - ① report or reason about the relevant nonconscious representations, nor use them in guiding action
 - ② 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)

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

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

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

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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

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

The Knowledge Argument

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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).

The Basic Argument

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)

What Does Mary Know?

What Does Mary Know?

- All the relevant physical information concerning human color vision
 - spectral reflectance
 - human physiology
 - neurological basis of visual perception

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

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The Weaker (Epistemological) Version

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

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

Advantages of the Knowledge Argument

Advantages of the Knowledge Argument

- Does not make controversial assumptions about points of view or the connection between objectivity and scientific inquiry (Nagel's argument)
- Does not make controversial assumptions about conceivability and possibility (the Modal argument)

Are Qualia Epiphenomenal?

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Epiphenomenalism: Mental events/properties are caused by physical events/properties in the brain but have no causal effect on physical events/properties

- analogous to the movements of one's shadow being epiphenomena of the movements of one's body
 - movements of the shadow are determined by movements of the body not vice versa

The Objection to Epiphenomenalism

[qualia] are an excrescence. They do nothing, they explain nothing, they serve merely to soothe the intuitions of dualists, and it is left a total mystery how they fit into the world view of science In short we do not and cannot understand the how and why of them."
(Jackson, 135)

The Objection to Epiphenomenalism

- Why think that we are in a position to understand the causal basis and nature of everything that exists?
 - Physicalism assumes that we are in a position to know the basic nature of everything that does or could exist
 - But perhaps there is reason to be humble about what we could possibly know of the natural world

The Humility Argument

The Humility Argument

consider the antecedent probability that everything in the Universe be of a kind that is relevant in some way or other to the survival of homosapiens. It is very low surely. But then one must admit that it is very likely that there is a part of the whole scheme of things, maybe a big part, which no amount of evolution will ever bring us near to knowledge about or understanding. For the simple reason that such knowledge and understanding is irrelevant to survival (Jackson, 135)

The Humility Argument

- ① Our capacity to understand the natural world depends on our evolved acquisition of various cognitive capacities
- ② The acquisition of cognitive capacities via evolution depends on their conduciveness to human survival
- ③ At least some cognitive capacities conducive to knowing the natural world are not conducive to survival
- ④ \therefore At least some knowledge of the world is unavailable to us because it is not conducive to our survival

Physicalist Optimism

- Are we being overly optimistic in thinking that our physical science is broadly complete and correct?

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The wonder is that we understand as much as we do, and there is no wonder that there should be matters which fall quite outside our comprehension. Perhaps exactly how epiphenomenal qualia fit into the scheme of things is one such. (Jackson, 135)

What the Physicalist Needs

- Tell us why doesn't Mary know what it is like to see color if she knows all the physical information?
 - Explain what changes about Mary when she leaves the room
 - Deny that any new *fact* is learned

Logic & Argument

Relations between Statements

- A statement is an expression that is true or false
 - Some statements cannot all be true together
-
- ① The wall is black
 - ② The wall is not black
-
- ① and ② cannot both be true – they are *inconsistent* with each other

Relations between Statements

Consistency: two or more statements are *consistent* when it is possible for all the statements to be true, without equivocation, at the same time

- Some philosophical problems stem from apparent inconsistencies between plausibly true statements—i.e. “paradoxes”

Paradoxes

The Paradox of Freedom and Causality

- ① All events are caused
 - ② Human actions are events
 - ③ Some human actions are free, that is, not caused
- Statements (1) - (3) are *inconsistent*, but which one do we reject?

Paradoxes

The Paradox of Reference and Existence

- ① Everything referred to must exist
 - ② The name "Hamlet" refers to Hamlet
 - ③ Hamlet does not exist
- Statements (1) - (3) are *inconsistent*, but which one do we reject?

Inconsistent Relations between Statements

Contradiction: a relation between two statements such that when one is true the other is false

Contrary: a relation between statements such that both statements cannot be true at the same time, though they can both be false