

Philosophy 101

Qualia & the Knowledge Argument

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Qualia and Physicalism

Physicalism and Dualism

Physicalism: Everything that is or could exist is physical or depends on the physical

Dualism: Something does or could exist that is either not physical or does not depend on the physical (or both)

Qualia

Qualia: a property 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

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 No amount of physical information logically entails that a person is phenomenally conscious
- ② So it is logically possible that there could be people, physically indistinguishable from ourselves, who nevertheless lack phenomenal consciousness
- ③ \therefore There is more to being phenomenally conscious than is entailed by the physical facts
- ④ \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

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

- 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?

- 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

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

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?

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

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?

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)